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Acknowledgements

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This book would not have been possible without Elliot Wolfson's granting me broad access to his paintings, to the archive of his poetry, and to his personal library. He patiently answered numerous questions, and he provided great insight into the texts and images. In various instances, details concerning the meanings associated with specific works have been provided in response to my queries; these exchanges are cited in the text. At the same time, a broad sense of interpretive latitude has been maintained throughout the writing process, a gift that any critic of contemporary art greatly appreciates. Thus, for what he said, and for what he did not say, Elliot Wolfson has my deepest thanks.

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Finally, I would like to thank the readers and viewers for making this journey into **Flowering Light**.

Blake's Body: Marcia Brennan and the Paradoxical Paintings of Elliot R. Wolfson

Jeffrey Kripal's Preface to Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson

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"O Human Imagination O Divine Body" " William Blake"

Elliot Wolfson began his first major monograph on medieval Jewish mysticism, **Through a Speculum that Shines** (1994), with the Blakean epigraph above.[\[footnote\]](#) This is how he concluded the same volume:
[\[footnote\]](#)

Elliot R. Wolfson, **Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

Ibid., 397.

"The hermeneutical circle is inscribed in the biblical verse "From my flesh I will see God," that is, from the sign of the covenant engraved on the penis the mystic can imaginatively visualize the divine phallus. The movement of the imagination is from the human body to God and from God back to the human body again." " Thus my path returns to Blake:" " The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination." " God Himself" " that is" " The Divine Body . . ."

These Blakean beginnings (and endings) are far more than mere poetic placeholders for Wolfson. Blake is not simply a source of clever quotes bookending an important first book; in fact, he enters into the theoretical substance and historical content of Wolfson's entire scholarly, poetic, and artistic corpus, his own postmodern kabbalah.

Not that Blake explains everything about Wolfson; his corpus cannot be fully explicated by a Blakean aesthetics. Elliot is not Will, nor is Will Elliot. Still, both artist-authors arrive at some remarkably similar conclusions about the nature of the religious imagination, about the grounding of myth, symbol, and mystical experience in the human body, about the fundamental centrality of the erotic within all of this, and about the importance of the poetic in expressing and advancing a truly radical argument. There are

many possible reasons for these resonances, foremost among them the historical fact that Blake appears to have been deeply influenced by kabbalistic strains of thought, as Sheila Spector has amply demonstrated in such loving detail.[\[footnote\]](#) And Wolfson, of course, has read and contemplated in turn his share of Blake's kabbalistic art. From medieval Kabbalah to William Blake to Elliot Wolfson and back again, we are caught in something of a hermeneutical circle again.

Sheila Spector, **Glorious Incomprehensible: The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Language** (Cranbury, New Jersey: Bucknell University Press, 2001), and **Wonders Divine: The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Myth** (Cranbury, New Jersey: Bucknell University Press, 2001).

Or is it a spiral? Much has been added along the way, after all. There is no quantum physics in the Zohar, but there is in Wolfson's writings on the Zohar. For example, in his reflections on the "timeswerve" of kabbalistic hermeneutics, he explicates the notion through comparisons with contemporary scientific speculations on space-time and string theory.

[\[footnote\]](#) Similarly, while it is possible but difficult to detect Asian influences in Blake's corpus, it is quite easy to do so in Wolfson's. His invocation of Hindu Tantric themes are quite common, and his paradoxical writing style often reads like something straight out of a Zen sermon.

[\[footnote\]](#) It is probably no accident that Wolfson came very close to studying Zen Buddhism in graduate school before he finally opted for Kabbalah—regardless, Buddhism still shadows, informs, deepens his work on Judaism. It is also probably no accident that the Blakean scholar who has advanced the most robust thesis of an "Asian Blake"—Marsha Keith Schuchard, who sees the poet as an erotic mystic with a fantastically tangled relationship to Moravian sexual-spiritual vision, Christian Kabbalah, Swedenborgian contemplative sexuality, and Asian Tantra—employs both Wolfson's work on medieval Kabbalah and my own work on nineteenth-century Bengali Tantra to advance specific details of her astonishing case.[\[footnote\]](#)

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, xvi-xxii, xxiv, 49, 201, 393-394.

To take a single text, for example, in **Language, Eros, Being**, he employs scholarship on Sahajiya Vaisnavaism (262), the **yin** and **yang** of Taoist symbolism (107-108), various schools of Buddhism (xvi, 56-58, 441-442), and Hindu Tantrism (79-80, 234, 262, 271).

Marsha Keith Schuchard, **Why Mrs. Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision** (London: Century, 2006).

My first attempt at an adequate reading of Wolfson—my **Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom**[[footnote](#)]—was premised on a single monograph, **Speculum**, buttressed by a number of his essays and collections and an extensive personal correspondence, not to mention friendship. Since I wrote **Roads**, however, Wolfson has gone on to publish three more major monographs—**Language, Eros, Being** (2005), **Venturing Beyond** (2006), and **Alef, Mem, Tau** (2006)—two more collections of essays (**Pathwings** [2004] and **Luminal Darkness** [2007]), and two volumes of poetry (**Secrets of the Heartland** [2004] and **Footdreams and Treetales** [2007]). [[footnote](#)] Moreover, Barbara Ellen Galli has published an insightful study of Wolfson's poetry in the tradition of Rosenzweig and Celan, **On Wings of Moonlight** (2007).[[footnote](#)]

Jeffrey J. Kripal, **Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Elliot R. Wolfson, **Pathwings: Philosophic and Poetic Reflections on the Hermeneutics of Time and Language** (Barrytown, NY: Barrytown/Station Hill Press, 2004); **Secrets of the Heartland: 32 Poems** (2004); **Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination** (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); **Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); **Venturing Beyond: Law & Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); **Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature** (Oxford: One World, 2007); **Footdreams and Treetales: 92 Poems** (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

Barbara Ellen Galli, **On Wings of Moonlight: Elliot R. Wolfson's Poetry in the Path of Rosenzweig and Celan** (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

Now, with this volume, an art historian with a special expertise in modern art and mysticism, Marcia Brennan, has given us a remarkable study of Wolfson's paintings, themselves put in conversation with the poems and the earlier scholarship.

What does it mean when a well-known scholar of Jewish mysticism, who has written so much on the paradoxical place of the image, of the aniconic icon, of God's body in Kabbalah, begins to produce his own paradoxical images? What is communicated by the paint of these always forming forms that is not communicated by the words of his scholarship? And how is this paint and this scholarship related in turn to the metaphors and paradoxes of his now published poetry? And how are all three creative realms—the scholarly, the poetic, and the artistic—related to one another? Such a gestalt reminds me, again, of Blake, that radical thinker, poet, and painter. But I do not wish to push this comparison too far. Whereas Blake's illustrated poems are filled with a very definite pantheon of mythically named muscled men and voluptuous women in various violent, erotic, and exaggerated poses, Wolfson's paintings are defined by a kind of formlessness seeking form, a swirling of paint that requires the interaction of the imagination of the viewer to give the image a more definite form. Both Blake and Wolfson need to be interpreted into being, but Wolfson gives a much wider berth to this hermeneutical process precisely because he provides much less form and direction. It is precisely what he does not say that allows him to say so much. It is precisely what he does not paint that allows his paintings to speak to each in a different way. Obviously, we are in the realm of a very familiar structure here, one well known to the historian of mystical literature: the paradox, the apophatic, the magic of meaning itself.

There is also something very new and very different here, what we might call—for lack of a better expression—the painted postmodern. At the risk of engaging in philosophical stereotypes, I might venture a broad (mis)reading. If modern Western thought represented a movement away from and out of the "dark" religious past into the stable, efficient, and hard lines of modernity, such forms of consciousness and culture have also brought with them their own darkness—a loss of soul, an eclipse of Spirit, an existential death. Postmodern thought arose for many reasons and has taken on numerous forms, but some of them at least have sought, like some modern-day shaman, to address quite directly this soul-crisis. Accordingly, they have willingly embraced a kind of dismemberment, entered the land of the dead and gone (that is, the past), and returned to create an apophatic space where divinity can speak again, where the formless can take a form, where the soul can be recovered and live again, not as it once was, of

course, but as it will be, as it might yet be. I read—or, better, see—Wolfson's paradoxical paintings as visual expressions of this postmodern space, as contemplative acts that honor the religious past, acknowledge the gains of modernity, but finally move beyond both to something that is still forming, still taking shape.

Toward what, it is difficult to say. I am quite certain that Elliot Wolfson will not tell us what his paintings or poems mean. As he related to Marcia Brennan, they come to him, like his poems, in "one breath," an enigmatic phrase suggestive of an inspiration (a "breathing in") from outside the conscious ego or social self and therefore beyond any completely rational grasp or theoretical understanding.



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Conflagration**, 2007. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

I certainly do not know what the paintings mean (although I confess to seeing something quite personal, and quite definite, in one that he gifted me, **Conflagration** [2007]). But both that refusal to pin down a final or singular meaning and that confessed not-knowing, I also suspect, are

precisely the points. Meaning here resides in that magical interactive space between reader and poem, between viewer and painting, between scholar and text, between signifier and signified, between presence and absence. It is up to us to derive meaning in and as the present, which is somehow, Wolfson would insist, linked to both the past and the future. We are in those paintings and poems. It is up to us to interpret into being this painted body, which is also our body. This is, if you will, Blake's body today, still taking shape, still coming to be. We do not yet, in truth, really exist. We're still struggling out of the paint and poems.

In order to come to be, in order to interpret and envision ourselves into existence, we will need all the help we can get. We will require new tools to understand our situation, a new way of looking, a fresh perspective. We will also require a way of speaking about paint, about the history of modern art, about abstraction and the spiritual, and about the still unrealized possibilities of the postmodern.

Enter Marcia Brennan. Brennan's training and expertise in the history of modern art gives her a very specific, and very apt, position from which to view the reflections and refractions of the scholarship, the poetry, and the paintings of Elliot Wolfson. This perspective is focused around themes present in her earlier work on the gendered aspects of the Alfred Stieglitz circle and American formalist aesthetics and the masculinity of modern abstractionism in Matisse and the New York School.[\[footnote\]](#) Some of these themes, like the gendered nature of modern abstraction and the erotics of the creative process, are fully developed in those earlier works and on display here again (in, for example, her elaborate erotic analyses of Wolfson's [**The Rose**](#), [**Fractured Androgyn**e](#), and [**Marriage**](#)). Others, like the apophatic, aniconic and spiritual dimensions of modern abstract art, the mystical potentials of postmodern thought, and what I would call the "animistic presence of a painting," work more behind the scenes, in the background of those earlier texts. Here, however, in **Flowering Light**, they appear on stage, the curtain fully raised.

See Marcia Brennan, **Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics** (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001); and **Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the**

New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).

A painting is not just a painting for Brennan. A painting is an imaginal presence, a living being that is brought to life, like some precious Golem, in and through the ritual interaction and Imagination of the sensitive viewer (the capitalization is intentional, and Blakean). The Cartesian subject, and with it the search for pure objectivity, is abandoned here for a much richer, and much more mysterious, postmodern self and accompanying epistemology that come to be (and to not be) through elaborate processes of mirroring, reflection, and refraction—in effect, a mystical language of dancing, flowering Light. Or, to switch registers and adopt Brennan's angelology, the paintings are seen to be bodies of angels, at once mediators and messengers poised between the divine and human worlds—winged meaning incarnate, Hermes hovering in the canvas. This angelic aesthetics is hardly an inappropriate move, as Wolfson's own chosen titles for the paintings often invoke just such an imaginal register. Thus Purple Angel, On Purple Wings, Green Angel, and so on.

In my **Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom**, I argued, in effect, for a mystical reading of Wolfson's scholarship on mysticism. I argued that what we see in his hermeneutics is a kind of postmodern gnosticism, a kabbalah for our times. In the pages that follow, Brennan offers a remarkably confluent reading of the scholar's painterly practices. With the honed skills of a trained and accomplished art historian, she develops an aesthetics to match, deepen, and extend this hermeneutics. In her own words now, "Wolfson's interpretive approach is characterized by close textual readings and rigorous theorizations that actively promote the dissolution—and creative re-envisioning—of received patterns of meaning. This method breaks new ground for the transformation of thought, as the texts themselves become a new form of mystical writing. In turn, Wolfson's paintings can be seen as compelling pictorial equivalents of these visionary processes, as the canvases serve as landscapes that enable viewers to walk between worlds."

I cannot affirm such a project enthusiastically enough. I would only underline here that such a soul-making aesthetics constitutes a truly radical

claim, and one with major implications for how we view both our art and our selves, which, within this particular gnoseology anyway, are themselves forms of art, bodies of light and beauty taking shape before and between and as us in that Eternal Divine Body of the Human Imagination, as Blake once put it so provocatively.

Introduction: Living with the Living: Entering and Exiting the Text, by Way of Night Traces

Author's introduction to Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Night Traces**, 2008. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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As a modernist art historian, I spend most of my time with the dead. Typically, this entails engaging with the artistic works of key historical figures, their accompanying exhibition histories, and their relations to significant developments in contemporary intellectual and cultural history.

Working with these established subjects not only means reconstructing an extensive base of primary visual and archival source materials, but negotiating a well-developed historiography and, with it, a corresponding set of accepted methodological strategies. Thus in various ways, working with the dead means engaging with the collective voice of the discourse on the discourse.

This study represents something different; as such, the text marks a departure that is also an arrival.[\[footnote\]](#) Because of the unique nature of the subject matter—the concordance of mystical and aesthetic expression in the scholarly, painted, and poetic works of a living author and artist, Elliot R. Wolfson—familiar templates of thought are not always readily available, or even aptly applicable. Instead, Wolfson’s artworks invite viewers to reconsider what it means to work with the living. Not only are his books and paintings the products of a living artist, but at the core of the corpus lies a set of ideas that sometimes seem to take on a life of their own. From a different historical perspective, I also examine the relations between mysticism and modernist aesthetics in my book **Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum** (forthcoming from the MIT Press, 2010).

In turn, this book is designed to reflect some of the complexities of its subject matter, in part through the convergence of art historical and religious studies methodologies with the domains of contemporary art criticism, poetry, and creative writing. In the crossing of these interpretive streams, what is said is also deeply informed by what remains unsaid. One particularly suggestive expression of such unsaying concerns the transgression of the edges that demarcate the familiar boundaries of established academic discourses. In so doing, this text is presented partly as a work of conceptual art that resonates with the capacity of mystical envisioning to create imaginative worlds. This is one of the reasons I wanted to write this book (and, hopefully, why you will want to read it). In short, in this study I am not just writing **about** mystical art and literature; on a certain level, the text represents an attempt to produce mystical art and literature, through words and images that can potentially induce these states aesthetically and hermeneutically in their readers.

At the outset, I should note that it was my own longstanding engagement with abstract art that initially drew me to the mystical discourses of kabbalah. That is, when encountering abstracted modernist painting and sculpture, viewers often find themselves in the paradoxical position of contemplating substantial surfaces that have been envisioned and instantiated as insubstantial forms, even as these forms are manifested materially as concrete, sensuous presences. To cite Wolfson's incisive formulation in his award-winning study, **Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination**, "In consonance with the teachings of mystic visionaries in various traditions, kabbalists assent to the view that the primary task of the imaginative faculty is to depict imaginarily what is without image, to embody that which is not a body, to give form to the formless."[\[footnote\]](#) Applying these concepts to the visual arts, abstracted painting and sculpture can be seen as suggestively imposing a form on that which has no form, thereby allowing the invisible to become visible.[\[footnote\]](#)

Elliot R. Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination** (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. xii.

Regarding these themes, see also Mark Godfrey, **Abstraction and the Holocaust** (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), for a discussion of Morris Louis's engagement with Jewish mystical conceptions of sacred fire in his **Charred Journal** series and in the prismatic light of his abstractions.

When confronted with the complexity of Wolfson's oeuvre, multiple interpretive pathways seem to emerge and diverge simultaneously, as intricate conceptual networks alternately reveal and conceal themselves in light of the paintings, poetry, and textual scholarship. In the encounter with these subtle and always demanding materials, the gift of the challenge is reflected in the challenge of the gift. Like a pearl that grows out of multiple shells simultaneously, this study is situated in the conjoined fields of these overlapping paradoxes.

"incubation" "serapis" "wrap this" "drape" "with gape" "plaited" "from" "poetic pearl" "verbally" "expunged" "from light" "plunged" "in darkness"

"we see" "seeping" "through" "husks of froth" "burning truth" "truth cannot prove" "beyond doubt" "reasonable or not"

Elliot R. Wolfson (b. 1956) is the Judge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. While he is primarily known as a distinguished scholar of the Jewish mystical traditions of kabbalah, Wolfson is also an accomplished painter and poet. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Wolfson's widely acclaimed books include **Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism** (1994); **Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination** (2005); **Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death** (2006); and **Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism** (2006). He is also the author of two volumes of poetry: **Pathwings: Philosophic and Poetic Reflections on the Hermeneutics of Time and Language** (2004); and **Footdreams and Treetales: 92 Poems** (2007). In these and numerous other important studies, Wolfson situates his readings of kabbalistic texts within a complex methodological framework that draws on the combined insights of Continental philosophy, poststructuralism, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and gender theory.[\[footnote\]](#) Moreover, throughout his works, Wolfson adopts a deeply comparativist, intrinsically ecumenical approach that links his exegesis of kabbalistic themes to related aesthetic and mystical perspectives in Islamic esoterism; pre-Socratic thought and Neoplatonic philosophy; the sacred corporeality of Christian incarnational theology; Hindu Tantric traditions, particularly Shakta Tantra; and the creative dissolution of being and nonbeing, the is/not that characterizes various Buddhist traditions, particularly Mahayana Buddhism and the Rinzai sect of Zen. When viewed as a whole, Wolfson's approach might aptly be characterized as a form of transmystical comparativism, a composite perspective that encourages alternative ways of seeing the world, and of seeing worlds that typically remain unseen. As Wolfson has remarked of these interpretive processes, "by digging deep into one tradition, one opens paths onto others."[\[footnote\]](#)

For an extended discussion of mysticism in Wolfson's oeuvre, with particular emphasis placed on **Through a Speculum That Shines**, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, **Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and**

Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), esp. pp. 258-98.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, August 22, 2006.

Incorporating these eclectic themes, “incubation” exemplifies Wolfson’s style of poiesis. With its lyrical conjunction of above and below, melting and burning, “incubation” reads like an allegory of occluded and revealed light. Wolfson’s language forms a convergent site of incubation and excavation, concealment and exposure, evoking the flickering depths of what lies within while also providing a skeletal framework for the quickening development of emergent presence. Explicitly invoking Serapis, an Egyptian underworld god who assists in processes of spiritual ascension, the verse begins with a nominal reference to the king of the deep. Yet the interwoven patterns of the deity’s name also call to mind the realm of the serap(h)s, the angels that surround and guard the throne of heaven while weaving a living veil of light, as they plait the luminous drapery that clothes the elemental world of form.

Resonating with these poetic and spiritual associations, Wolfson’s abstract painting **Night Traces** (2008) is a dark, evanescent canvas that can be viewed symbolically as an overlighting veil that was woven in the interval before form takes form. In this tonally nuanced work, horizontal bands of black and white brushstrokes undulate across a visually spare surface, where they coalesce to form a monochromatic field of softly blended shades of gray that are heightened by contrasting accents of red and blue-violet. While the painting is wholly nonrepresentational, **Night Traces** could present an indeterminate view of nighttime darkness as glimpsed through the transparent surface of a plate-glass window, or perhaps a dissolving vision of moonlight reflected on wet city pavement. Building on an undifferentiated base of ground and sky, material surfaces and ethereal atmospheres become interchangeable. The scene discloses nothing, even as it gestures beyond the shadows of doubted forms. In the crossing of these thematic currents, the painting’s pictorial field becomes an aesthetic incubator that cradles alternating possibilities of presence and absence as it incorporates its opposite into itself. Thus in both **Night Traces** and “incubation,” the oyster and the pearl have become interchangeable, as their identity and their difference are simultaneously revealed and concealed in

the enfolded depths of their reciprocally encrusted surfaces. As is the case throughout Wolfson's oeuvre, such mutually intertwined associations are strung together like a strand of iridescent beads. Woven from gaping openness and secret(ed) out into the world, the artworks can be approached as veils whose underlying subjects remain at once draped and exposed, revealing as much as they conceal, so that "in darkness / we see."

As this suggests, one of the remarkable formal characteristics of Wolfson's oil paintings lies in their ability to convey a fragile sense of transient light, a dynamic quality that resonates thematically with the mystical capacity to embody multiple temporal and spatial locations simultaneously. Indeed, Wolfson's canvases appear less like stable pictorial surfaces than as shimmering fields of luminous color on which forms continually crystallize, blossom, and dissolve, as shifting patterns light the paintings from within. Just as Wolfson's artworks present these themes through a language of pictorial abstraction, they clothe their subjects in a range of sacred, angelic, erotic, and temporal associations. Coupled with ethereal titles such as **Green Angel** (2006), **Fractured Androgyn**e (2006), and **Inkblood** (2006), Wolfson's artworks invite their viewers to imagine the bodies of angels as painted incarnations of living light. Indeed, Wolfson's creative and scholarly corpus can be seen symbolically as an expression of "flowering light." This evocative image is taken directly from Wolfson's poem "embodied naked," [[footnote](#)] a work discussed throughout this text: This poem can be found in Elliot R. Wolfson, **Pathwings: Philosophic and Poetic Reflections on the Hermeneutics of Time and Language** (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 2004), p. 82.

"through gate return" "yet to be born," "flowering light" "in silence beyond," "the meadow below," "under which dwells" "empty sign," "laughter of lover," "lurking in touch," "approaching retreat," "fragment unbroken," "echo of word" "never once spoken," "yearning to hold" "what must be scattered," "naked in body, " "fully attired "

With their evanescent play of presences and absences, Wolfson's paintings and poems do not emanate, either formally or philosophically, from a traditional humanist framework. Moreover, just as the images are neither conventionally representational nor iconographically driven, Wolfson's

artwork does not lean on the inherited templates of an art school background. Rather, his artistic training is largely autodidactic. Growing up in New York City, he was fortunate to be surrounded by some of the world's great museums, which he began to visit on a regular basis during his high-school years. He vividly recalls the many hours spent at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In these galleries, he found himself especially drawn to the paintings of the French Impressionists, Van Gogh, Matisse, Chagall, and Klee. He also studied the mysterious illumination of Edward Hopper's scene paintings, and the dramatic chiaroscuro displayed throughout Rembrandt's self-portraits and history paintings. As he notes of his early encounters with these artworks, "I connected with the medium well before I started painting." [\[footnote\]](#) Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with the author, June 30, 2008. The details concerning Wolfson's artistic background stem from this interview.

Wolfson also recalls that he experienced his first real impulse to paint while he was a graduate student at Brandeis University during the early nineteen eighties, and that he sold books in order to buy painting materials. When asked about what originally motivated his painting, he responded, "I can't explain the genealogy of the urge, except to try to translate what I was thinking and feeling into visual form." He initially produced a few canvases, let them go, and a couple of years later he painted a few additional works, which survive to this day. One such early canvas appears on the cover of **Footdreams & Treetales**. Nearly twenty years passed until, during the spring of 2003, a visitor asked him what was lying in storage bags in his office. He recalls that, from that point onward, he felt encouraged to explore painting in a way that he had never done before.

As an author, poet, and visual artist, Wolfson attempts to articulate a vision through complementary media. Not only are pronounced thematic resonances readily discernible between his poetic and scholarly texts, but the titles of Wolfson's paintings can be seen as closely related paratextual presences. Moreover, Wolfson himself has identified an important similarity between his academic and his artistic work, as both provide "recourse to another way of seeing" and access to other states of consciousness.

[\[footnote\]](#) All turn on a similar dynamic of collapsing seemingly stable or

discrete boundaries between time and space, presence and absence. Wolfson emphasizes that the mysteriously decomposing and emergent forms appearing throughout his canvases emanate from affective states without premeditated intentionality. Instead, a feeling moves him to work on the canvas, “and in the absence of the feeling, the artwork wouldn’t happen.” His verse unfolds in a similar manner, as “a word will come to mind and germinate into a poem with very little effort.” In this way, “the decomposed presences become clothed or vested in the words,” just as the paintings represent a similar “attempt at crossing boundaries and bringing the formless into form through color.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with the author, June 30, 2008.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with the author, June 30, 2008.

From floor to ceiling, Wolfson’s Manhattan study is filled with a dazzling collection of books. His library is at once an intimate and expansive space in which ancient and rare volumes are interspersed with classic texts and contemporary publications, while his own recent canvases perch on nearby easels. Indeed, the unique character of the space itself seems to engender creative associations. Thus when one envisions ancient texts, some of the images that come to mind are of precious books printed on fine laid and wove papers and, prior to this, illuminated manuscripts inscribed and painted on vellum. Vellum is “a fine kind of parchment prepared from the skins of calves (lambs or kids) and used especially for writing, painting, or binding; also, any superior quality of parchment or an imitation of this.”[\[footnote\]](#) The term vellum thus denotes the solid yet translucent sheets that form the underlying grounds of ancient folios, many of which are adorned with gilded leaves and colored parchments. These evocative images seem to inspire a string of poetic associations, as one concept leads to another. When vellum appears with a single l, the word transforms into velum, which denotes “a screen or protection,” a “soft palette,” or a “membrane or membranous part likened to a veil or curtain.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Much like painted books on vellum, velum also carries strong aesthetic and spiritual connotations. The term derives from the Latin **vēlum**, which refers to a sail, awning, curtain, covering, or veil. In rabbinic Hebrew, vilon (velum) not only signifies “curtain,” but the first of seven levels of heaven, the sphere that renews the daily work of creation.[\[footnote\]](#) In Old Testament scriptures, vilon represents the first heaven “That stretches out

the heavens as a curtain (vilon), and spreads them out as a tent to dwell in” (Isaiah 40: 22).

This definition is found in the **Oxford English Dictionary Online** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), at
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50275703?
single=1&query_type=word&queryword=vellum&first=1&max_to_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50275703?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=vellum&first=1&max_to_show=10).

These definitions are found in **Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary** (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1969), p. 984; and the **Oxford English Dictionary Online**, at
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50275735?
single=1&query_type=word&queryword=velum&first=1&max_to_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50275735?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=velum&first=1&max_to_show=10).

William J. Morford, **The Power New Testament: Revealing Jewish Roots**. 3rd ed. (Lexington, S.C.: Shalom Ministries, 2003).

Throughout his scholarly and creative work, Wolfson deeply engages with the leitmotif of the veil (velum).[\[footnote\]](#) This imagery is particularly prominent in his latest book, **Open Secret: Post-Messianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson** (2009). In this work, Wolfson undertakes an extensive study of the seventh master of the intellectual and mystical traditions associated with the Hasidic movement of orthodox Judaism known as Habad. In the Introduction, which is meaningfully entitled “Behind the Veil Unveiled,” Wolfson observes: “There is no manner of beholding that is not beholding through a garment. To paraphrase a well-known Sufi sentiment, the presumption that one can see without a veil is the greatest of veils.” He proceeds to address the envisioning of divinity in the messianic era, particularly the promise that this period “will be marked by a vision of the essence of the light of the Infinite without any garment.” Turning the folds of the question back on themselves, he asks, “Can such disclosure be anything but occlusion? I think it is closer to the spiritual marrow of Habad, as it were, to surmise that the seeing without a garment consists of coming to see that there is nothing ultimately to see but the garment that there can be a seeing without any garment. The very notion of removing all garments, in other words, is the ultimate garment, and, consequently, what is seen of the light without any garment is the very garment through which the light is (un)seen.”[\[footnote\]](#)

See also Wolfson's **Language, Eros, Being**, esp. pp. 224-33, for a discussion of the imagery of the veil in relation to themes of incarnational theology and mystical enlightenment.

Wolfson shared these passages from his forthcoming text in an email of June 24, 2008. His study, **Open Secret: Post-Messianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson**, is forthcoming from Columbia University Press, 2009.

Thus in Wolfson's theoretical formulation, the veil both embodies and performs a radical inversion that inverts the very notion of inversion. He concludes the Introduction, thereby closing his opening, by again allowing the veil to fold back on itself. As he observes, "The unicity consigned to the end is a visual attunement to the void of all being, the void of all things fully void, the breach of unity by which the unity of the breach (dis)appears in and through the cleft of consciousness. In this temporal crevice and spatial hiatus, the symbolic is imagined as real, and the real as symbolic. I trust that the excursions of this book will help others to lift many veils, but I am ever mindful that with every veil lifted, another will be unfurled."[\[footnote\]](#)

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, June 24, 2008.

"through her veil" "through" "her veil" "his voice" "i heard" "vacated" "in time" "behind" "their nakedness" "etched in" "stone" "the name" "we cannot" "re/member" "to forget" "what it was" "we remembered" "to forget"

Just as Wolfson's various reflections on the veil appear in the contexts of a scholarly study of Habad and a collected volume of poetry,[\[footnote\]](#) this ambivalent mystical imagery also sheds valuable light on the paintings. When asked about these thematic conjunctions, Wolfson affirmed to me that the passages from the Habad book are indeed "sufficient to confirm your sense of the importance of the trope of the veil and how it joins together this [scholarly] work (much of my work really) and the paintings."[\[footnote\]](#) Thus, much as words create complementary aesthetic and hermeneutical structures in Wolfson's writings, so too does color serve as a veil in his paintings, as pigment appears as a material presence that grounds the ungroundable. Such modalities of formal enclosure are necessary to convey an intrinsic sense of their own largesse, or the insight that there is always

more to find in the hiding of the hidden. When these concepts are translated into art historical terms, Wolfson's abstract paintings can be seen as simultaneously encompassing and eliding the categorical frameworks that distinguish the very boundaries between abstraction and representation. With their intricate configurations of emerging and dissolving presences, the paintings can be viewed as conjunctive membranes or translucent screens that simultaneously demarcate and disseminate the material and the ethereal domains, bringing to earth mystical imagery that invokes the shifting veils of a living heaven (vilon).

The poem "through her veil" can be found in Elliot R. Wolfson, **Footdreams and Treetales: Ninety-Two Poems** (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 68.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, June 24, 2008.

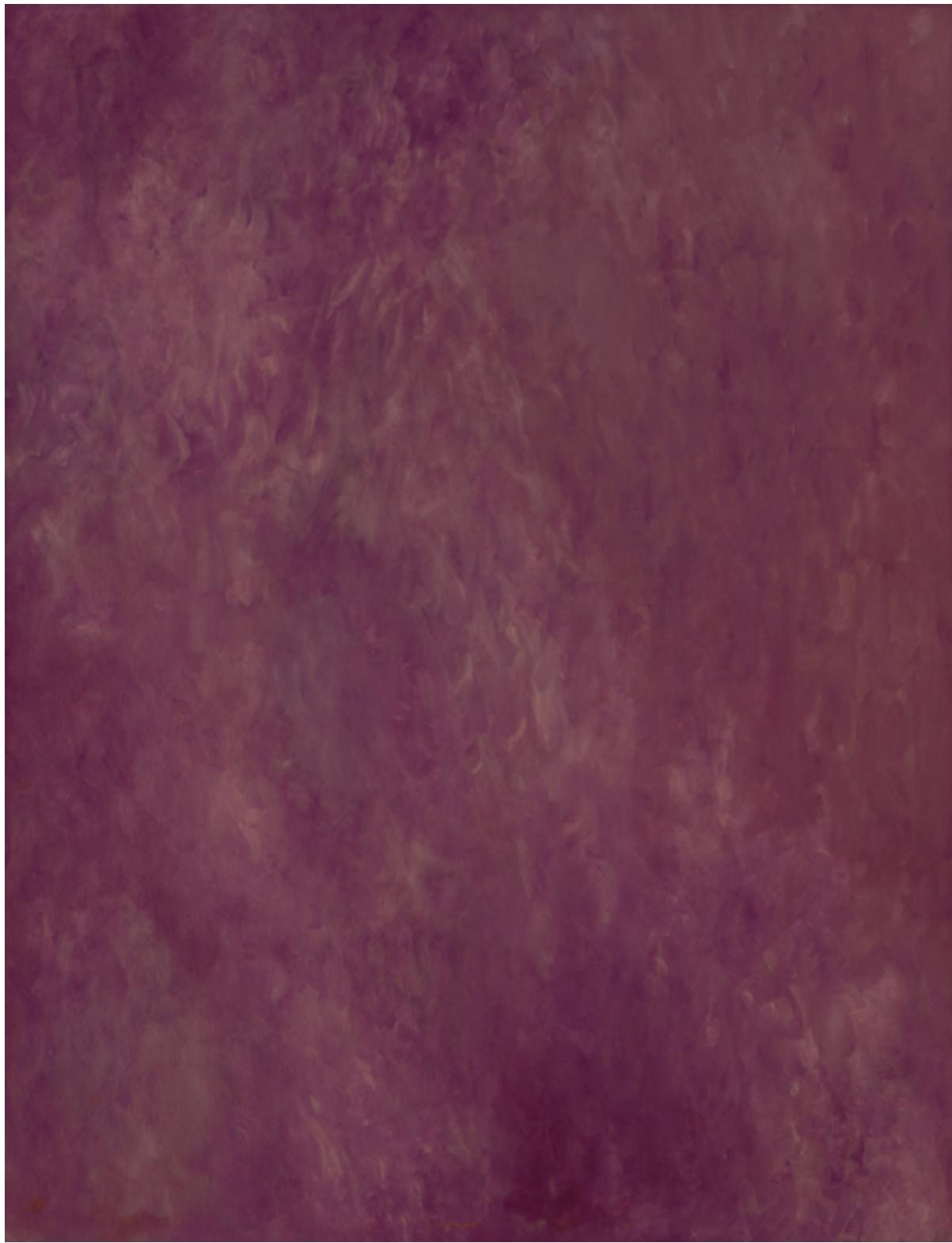
These observations on creative envisioning lead to a final reflection on time, timeliness, and contemporaneity. Wolfson characterizes his own writing as being not the product of a medievalist, a modernist, or a postmodernist, but rather as contributing to "the thinking that is happening now."[\[footnote\]](#) Thus it is perhaps especially appropriate that this study should be brought forth by Rice University Press, a publisher that is also consciously engaged in shaping the thinking that is happening now by actively pursuing the dual publishing platforms of digital and print media. The concurrent appearance of books in such multiple electronic and paper formats promises to contribute in new ways to an expanded sense of what it means to work with living texts. Indeed, a digital press seems to present an ideal forum for potentially transgressive ideas, edgy new expressions of the art and "thought that is happening now." Not only can these subjects include the "risky" work of contemporary living artists, but innovative conceptual experiments with hybrid, transdisciplinary genres that necessitate a series of boundary crossings, and thus a reforming of established categorical grounding.

Wolfson notes that this expression is a modification of the phrase used by his colleague, David Leahy, who describes his own interpretive methodology as part of the "thinking that is occurring now." Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, July 18, 2008.

Like a pearl that grows out of multiple shells simultaneously, this study is situated within the multiple fields of these overlapping paradoxes. It is my hope that such composite positioning engenders new configurations of living ideas to form in the conjunctive membranes (*velum*) that lie within, behind, and beyond the adjacent surfaces of the printed page, the painted canvas, and the digital veil.

Beginning by Way of Twilight: Purple Angel

Chapter One of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism
and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot Wolfson, **Purple Angel**, 2003. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Imagine that you are sitting at a very clear, level desk. On the desk's pristine surface are several extremely delicate pieces of hand-cut lace. With their extensive networks of interwoven patterns, the pieces display all the internal intricacies of snowflakes or water crystals. Imagine picking up one section in your left hand, one in your right, and placing them side-by-side on the desktop. As you study the designs closely, you see that each pattern is different, just as you are looking for configurations that could be the same. At first, it appears that you cannot find any to match. Then all at once, the patterns all become the same. You blink—thinking that you cannot be seeing what you're seeing—and as you look even more closely, the patterns suddenly change their internal configurations once again. The crystalline clearness of the cut-outs shifts before your eyes, and you see the dynamic creation of the differentials from a new angle. After a moment, you realize that your gaze is the knife that cuts the paper, just as your thoughts create the intricate patterns of the lace. And then you know that you are looking at magic.

This evocative imagery provides an apt metaphor for the experience of engaging intensely with Wolfson's paintings, poetry, and texts. In this context, the term "magic" is particularly suggestive, as it calls to mind a deep yet half-buried connection between esoteric mystical practices and the applied techniques of the visual arts. In his classic study, **A General Theory of Magic** (1950), the sociologist Marcel Mauss observed that "magic includes, in fact, a whole group of practices which we seem to compare with those of religion," just as the term expresses a close relationship with language and aesthetics, as "mystical and poetic elements" become articulated as "forms of collective representations."[\[footnote\]](#) As Mauss further observes, "magic has found a thousand fissures in the mystical world from whence it draws its forces, and is continually leaving it in order to take part in everyday life and play a practical role there. It has a taste for the concrete...[since] magic is essentially the art of doing things, and magicians have always taken advantage of their know-how, their dexterity, their manual skill."[\[footnote\]](#)

Marcel Mauss, **A General Theory of Magic**, trans. Robert Brain (1950; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 8, 144.

Mauss, **A General Theory of Magic**, p. 141. In the **Encyclopedia of Religion**, John Middleton similarly emphasizes an integral connection between religion and magic. As he states in the entry for the term “magic”: “In most known societies, magic forms an integral part of the sphere of religious thought and behavior, that is, with the sacred, set apart from the everyday. In some societies, especially in the industrialized West, it is generally accepted as superstition and even as a form of sleight of hand used for entertainment. In addition it has almost always been considered to mark a distinction between Western and so-called primitive societies, or between Christian and non-Christian religions. Therefore it is not really feasible to consider ‘magic’ apart from ‘religion,’ with which it often has been contrasted, as many of its defined elements refer to their opposition to what both local adherents and outside observers consider the more orthodox elements of religion.” See John Middleton, “Magic,” in Lindsay Jones, ed., **Encyclopedia of Religion**, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), vol. 8, p. 5562.

Much like the shifting surfaces of Wolfson’s abstract paintings, magic can thus be seen as a dynamic artform that evokes transformational possibilities in the blink of an eye. These shimmering, transmutational relations are also reflected in Wolfson’s poem “winged purple”:[[footnote](#)] “winged purple” appears in **Footdreams and Treetales**, p. 3.

“ winged purple ” “starlite dust” “ending day” “night must”

In the doubling of words that comprise the four lines of this quatrain, Wolfson presents a transient image of temporal evanescence in which twilight emerges as a threshold between worlds, an ephemeral corridor between liminal states of time and being. In so doing, the poem invites its readers to rethink the familiar relations between dualism and doubling. Just as this interval incorporates falling light and ascending darkness, the etymology of the word “twilight” is suffused with paradox. The prefix “*twi*” is related to the German word **zwei**, which denotes not only the numerical value of two, but the analogical concepts of doubling, doubled, and twice. Viewed from these multiple perspectives simultaneously, twilight is at once a time of two distinctive lights—a hinge between the diurnal and the nocturnal worlds, the discernible point where the falling light of day meets

the rising darkness of night. Twilight thus encompasses a time that is twice light, as fading sunlight and emerging starlight meld into a two-fold unity of doubled light.

A complementary pattern of doubling is also expressed in Wolfson's painting **Purple Angel** (2003). In this abstract canvas, the absent presence of the eponymous abstracted angel appears through just such a sparkling play of doubled light. Wolfson has noted that one of the primary iconographic reference points for the painting concerns "an Ismaili tradition about the active intellect, or Gabriel, who...is the highest angel in Islamic lore having dictated the Qur'an to Muhammad."[\[footnote\]](#) In **Language, Eros, Being**, Wolfson discusses the ways in which the prominent scholar of Islamic religion, Henry Corbin, engages the exegesis of "the Jewish mystic Joseph ben Judah" Ibn Aqnin regarding the Genesis story of Jacob's struggle with the angel (who, in some rabbinic sources, is identified as Gabriel). This narrative relates to "the soul's quest for union with the Active Intellect, personified as the angel in the form of an anthropos.... Corbin insightfully discerned that the philosophical interpretation of the Song [of Songs] as a figurative account of the conjunction of the human and Active Intellect may be demarcated as a form of speculative mysticism."[\[footnote\]](#) Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, April 17, 2006.

See Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 536, n. 332; and Henry Corbin, **Creative Imagination in the Šūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī**, trans. Ralph Manheim (1958; Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XCI, 1969), p. 35.

In the **Sahih Bukhari**, a collection of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, the Archangel Gabriel is described as having six hundred wings.[\[footnote\]](#) This mystical imagery seems to inspire the question of how one might see the unseeable, namely the indescribable radiance of such a shimmering multitude of angel wings. In turn, the vivid imagery associated with "envisioning the invisible" has profound resonance in kabbalistic texts, particularly as an expression of a state in which opposites become identical in the blink of an eye. When commenting on the angelic and temporal dimensions of these themes, Wolfson has observed that Abraham Abulafia, the thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist who is known as the leading exponent of ecstatic kabbalah, has expressed the "idea that

the difference between good and evil, the angel of life and the angel of death, is like a split second, less than the blink of an eye, an indivisible point. He relates this to an earlier Talmudic image that compares twilight to the blink of the eye. For Abulafia, the paradox is that this time of the moment, the blink of the eye, is the no-time of twilight, and in that time that is no-time, the cut of the sword, lies the difference between the holy and profane. As I recall, [the poem] ‘winged purple’ is right in that interval of time that is no time—‘ending day / night must.’”^[footnote] Enveloped within the doubled folds of these passages is a quintessentially transitional domain, a diaphanous site where the existential realm of the spectator meets the numinous presences of the painting and the poem in an exchange that can be envisioned as a conjunction of two lights.^[footnote]

See **Sahih Bukhari**, trans. M. Muhsin Khan, vol. 4, book 54, no. 455, at the University of Southern California’s website of a “Compendium of Muslim Texts”:

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/054.sbt.html>.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, August 26, 2006. For an extended discussion of these themes, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence: Angelic Embodiment and the Alterity of Time in Abraham Abulafia,” **Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts** 18 (2008), pp. 133-90. It should also be noted that these aesthetic formulations resonate with the conception of divinity expressed in the writings of the thirteenth-century kabbalist Azriel ben Menahem. In **Language, Eros, Being**, Wolfson notes that this author writes of “the fullness of being beyond the polarity of being and nonbeing. Azriel alludes to this point when he situates unity (**ha-yihud**) at the moment of transition ‘when the light disappears and darkness comes or when darkness disappears and the light sparkles, to attest that the Lord is unified in all the opposites.’” See Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 97.

Regarding the blink of an eye as the time of no time, see also the Postface of Wolfson’s **Open Secret: Post-Messianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson**.

Moreover, these themes are creatively expressed within the formal structures of Wolfson’s painting itself. In **Purple Angel**, modulated shades of violet and purple are interspersed with soft passages of white, while

scattered hints of warm orange oscillate in faint bands that collectively project a warm, encircling radiance. Through these shifting tonal configurations, a subtle angelic body emerges, a glowing presence composed of flame-like wisps. Suggestive patterns are further formed by feathery, melting brushstrokes along the left- and right-hand sides of the composition, which variously appear as wings and haloes. Taken together, this arrangement of translucent painterly forms evokes the overlapping silhouettes of a multidimensional figural presence, one whose contours are palpably discernible yet fluidly elusive. The visual effect is that of a dissolving, etheric being that is configured through its own multiple presences and absences. Continually expanding and contracting at the glistening edges of its forms, **Purple Angel** is, paradoxically, solid and insubstantial, iconic and aniconic. The composite figure that emerges within this vibrant colorfield holds the space of the canvas in a manner much like a flame or a waterfall, as a luminous yet abstract presence that appears clothed in a dynamic play of ascending color and falling light.

As is the case throughout Wolfson's oeuvre, the title **Purple Angel** invites viewers to imagine the bodies of angels as painted incarnations of living light. Much like the term "magic," this description raises such questions as: What do we mean by angels, and through what conditions or means—such as the practices of visualization in various mystical traditions—might angels be seen and known in this world? [[footnote](#)] While references to angels are culturally and historically specific, it is nonetheless useful to begin with some preliminary definitions. According to the **Oxford English Dictionary**, the word angel derives from the Latin **angelus**, which means "messenger." [[footnote](#)] The term angel signifies "a ministering spirit or divine messenger; one of an order of spiritual beings superior to man in power and intelligence, who, according to the Jewish, Christian, Mohammedan, and other theologies, are the attendants and messengers of the Deity." [[footnote](#)] The expanded entry on angels appearing in the **Encyclopedia of Religion** notes that "the word 'angel' applies to ranks of spiritual or heavenly beings which serve as intermediaries between the earthly and divine worlds," and that contemplation of angels can include "influences produced from links with alchemy, astrology, divination, and magic." [[footnote](#)] Given that angels are described as intermediary presences interlinking the heavenly and earthly spheres, conceptions of their

embodiment—in this case, their aesthetic embodiment in paintings and poems—can provide a vivid framework for their symbolic manifestation in the imaginative domain.

On the subject of mystic visualization, it is suggestive to contemplate a passage from the gnostic Gospel of Mary, which addresses the question of whether the sacred is seen through internal (“soul”) or external (“spirit”) vision. After Jesus’ death, Mary tells the other disciples, “I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, ‘Lord, I saw you today in a vision.’ He answered and said to me, ‘Blessed are you that you did not waver at the sight of me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure.’ I said to him, ‘Lord, how does he who sees the vision see it through soul or through the spirit?’ The Saviour answered and said, ‘He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind which [is] between the two—that is [what] sees the vision...’” See “The Gospel of Mary” in James M. Robinson, ed., **The Nag Hammadi Library in English** (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 523-27. I am grateful to Jeffrey Kripal for bringing this passage to my attention. Notably, the Hebrew word for angel, **mal’ak**, also connotes “messenger.” J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., **The Oxford English Dictionary**, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), vol. 1, p. 458. For an analysis of “Sexuality and Gender of Angels” in biblical and classical sources, see Kevin Sullivan’s essay by this name in April D. DeConick, ed., **Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism** (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), pp. 211-28. Regarding images of “the angelic body” in classical sources, see Indra Kagis McEwen, **Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture** (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003). For a modern poetic meditation on the bodies of angels, see H. D.’s [Hilda Doolittle’s] incandescently beautiful “Tribute to the Angels” (1945) in **Trilogy** (New York: New Directions, 1998), pp. 61-110. I am grateful to Stephen Fredman for bringing this work to my attention.

See Andrea Piras, “Angels,” trans. Paul Ellis, **Encyclopedia of Religion**, vol. 1, p. 343.

Moreover, just as the term “angel” is intrinsically multifaceted and comparative, so too is Wolfson’s engagement with the concept. This is particularly evident in Wolfson’s commentary on Corbin’s explications of visionary Islamic traditions concerning the **mundus imaginalis**, or imaginal world.[\[footnote\]](#) As Wolfson points out, the intermediate, imaginal world

has itself been described as an angelic sphere. Yet this meeting point is nothing other than “the ‘world of the image’ (*ālam al-mithāl*), also identified as the angelic realm (**malakūt**), the intermediate sphere wherein the suprasensible and formless realities of the realm of spirit are configured in the sentient forms of the material universe.”[\[footnote\]](#) In turn, this mystical imagery resonates strongly with the kabbalistic conceptions of envisioning the invisible that Wolfson traces throughout **Language, Eros, Being**. One such formulation concerns the idea that, in the heart of the visionary, the division between inside and out—the boundary separating the internal life of the subject from the external domain of the world—can be imaginatively dissolved through a process of spiritual double mirroring. Both the power and the paradox of this formulation are striking, since together they form the idea that language, thought, and imagination can provide a creative framework to picture what cannot be pictured, to see what cannot be seen, to know what cannot be fully known. As Wolfson has written, “The locus of [kabbalistic] gnosis was typically situated in the heart/imagination of the visionary, the site where the routine division between inside and outside is dissolved in the theophanic play of double mirroring, the heart mirroring the image that mirrors the image of the heart.”[\[footnote\]](#)

As also noted in the **Encyclopedia of Religion**, certain Islamic traditions posit that “All sensible and material reality is created and controlled by a particular type of archangel. These archangels occupy a **mundus imaginalis** between the physical and spiritual worlds and can be perceived by the sage by means of imagination.” See Piras, “Angels,” **Encyclopedia of Religion**, vol. 1, p. 346.

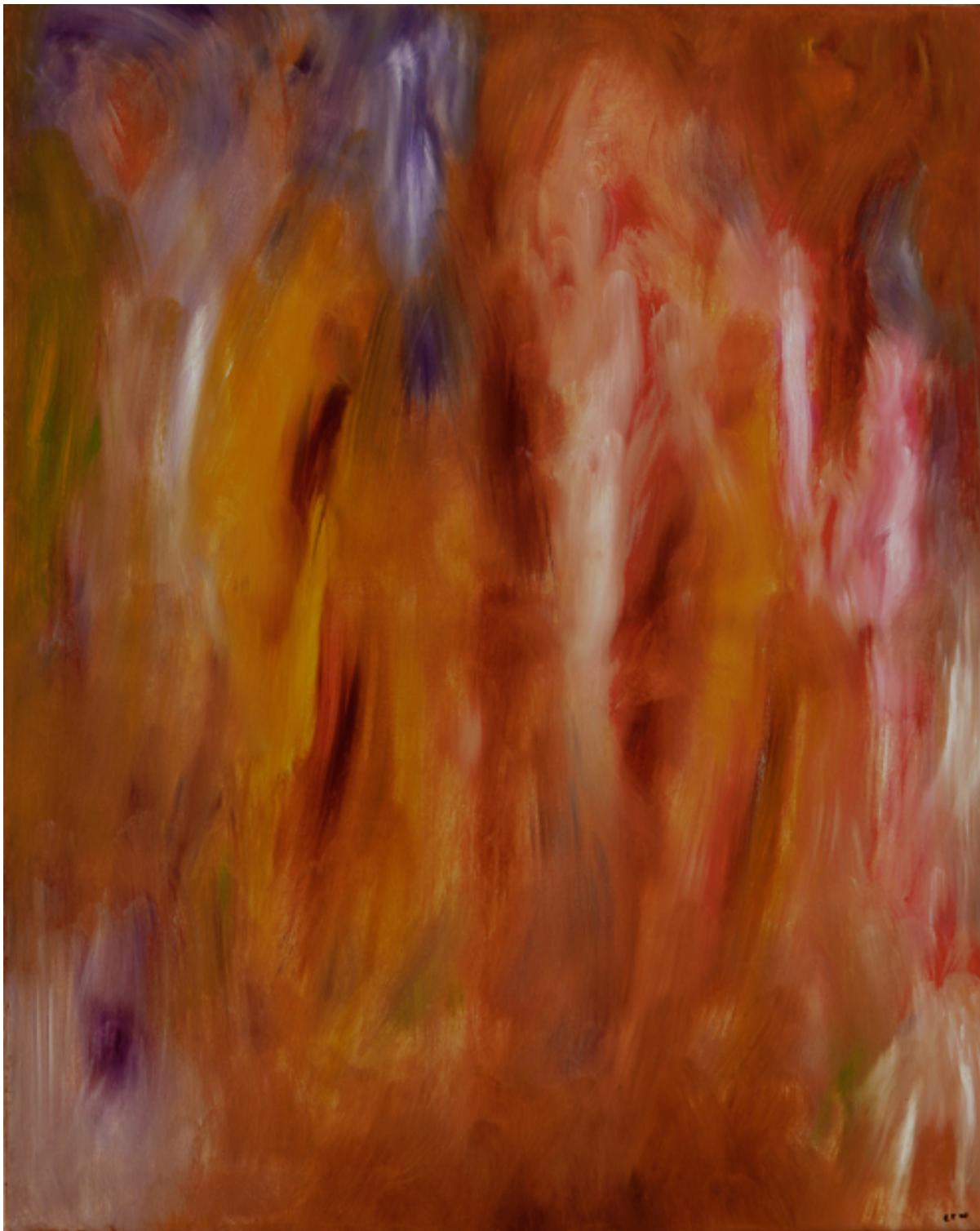
Elliot R. Wolfson, “**Imago Templi** and the meeting of the two seas: Liturgical time-space and the feminine imaginary in zoharic Kabbalah,” Res 51 (Spring 2007), p. 123.

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. xiii. For a related discussion of Corbin’s conception of the **imago templi** as “a theophanic apparition that challenges the dichotomization of the real and imagined,” see Wolfson, “*Imago Templi*,” pp. 121 ff.

As this suggests, Wolfson’s approach is characterized by close readings that actively promote the dissolution—and creative re-envisioning—of received patterns of meaning. As exemplified by “winged purple” and **Purple**

Angel, subtle gradations of flowing color and sparkling light can provide an imaginative screen for tracing the intermittent visual rhythms of forms that dematerialize and recede, only to emerge anew. Engaging in this form of contemplative envisioning—unseeing the seen in order to see the unseen—is analogous to undertaking a kind of intense meditative practice, one that consciously allows for the dissolution of the stable bonds that hold any particular set of forms together. To practice such fluid viewing, or nonattachment to any given pattern, is to maintain a sense of openness to the multiplicity of the possible. With this comes the corresponding realization that opacity and transparency, formation and dissolution, collectively represent distinctive aspects of a shared state of being, as every revelation of a pattern simultaneously conceals and exposes the glimmering traces of another—symbolically envisioned as the bodies of angels, by way of twilight.

The Epiphany of the (In)visible: Texture and Epiphany
Chapter Two of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism
and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson.

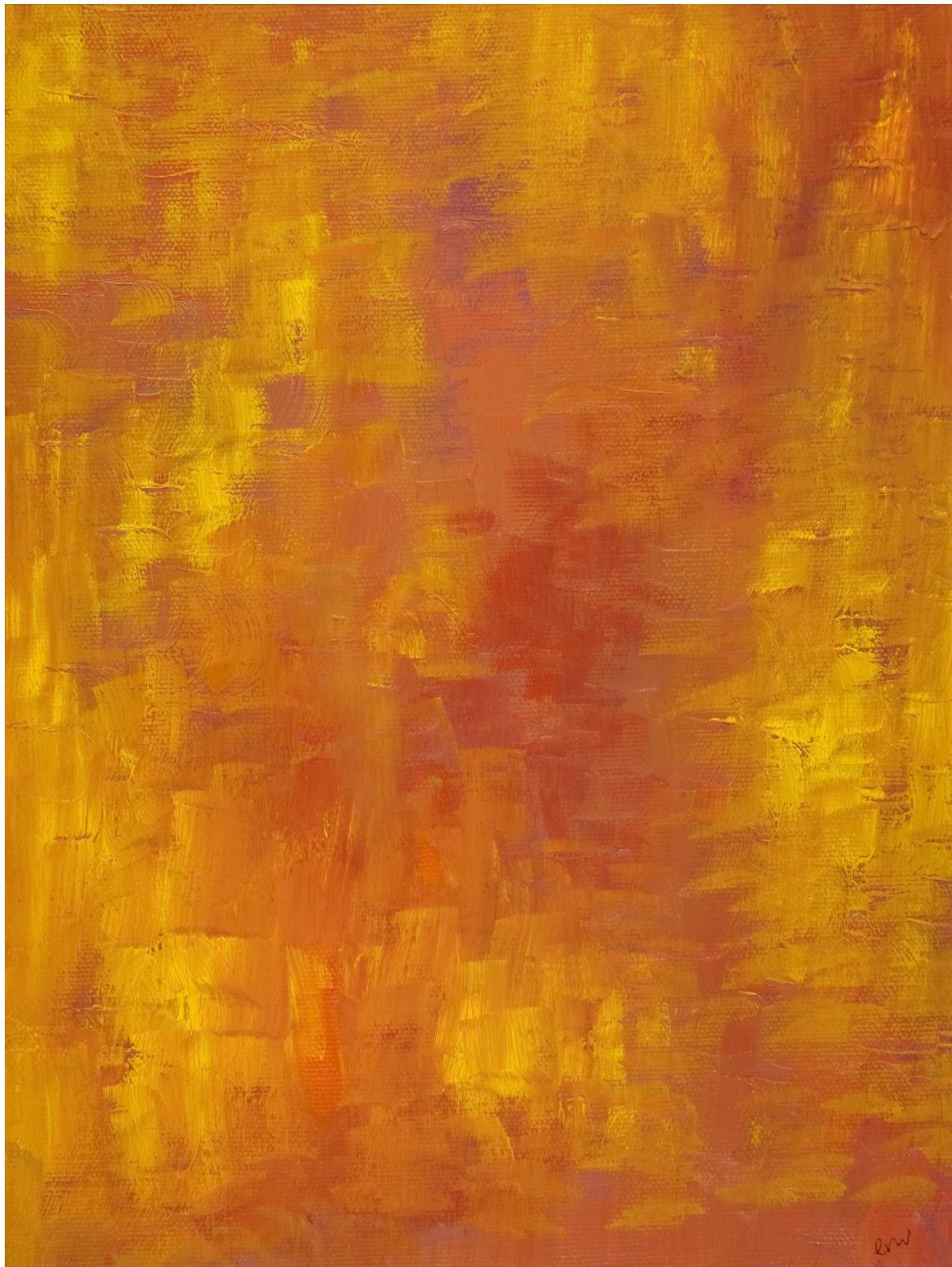


Elliot R. Wolfson, **Epiphany**, 2008. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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The highly textured surfaces of Wolfson's canvases can be viewed imaginatively as complex fabrics whose interwoven threads form a nuanced language readable on multiple levels simultaneously. One way to approach this interpretive task is to view the paintings as a visual paradox, as diaphanous surfaces showcasing an epiphany of the (im)possible. Despite their differences in meaning, both terms—diaphanous and epiphany—share a common root, **phainein**, which means “to show.” Examining the terms more closely, it becomes evident that their significant distinctions lie in their prefixes, which designate the location of the appearance, or the site of the showing. While “*epi*” connotes a sense of proximity that lies on, at, or near the surface, “*dia*” suggests a fluid movement that extends through or across space, so that transparent outer textures reveal a delicate sense of veiled interiority. Significantly, the prefix **dia** also connotes the principle of relationship, as in the words *dia-lectic* and *dia-gnosis*, which respectively convey the ideas of conversing with and knowing through.

These themes are vividly expressed in Wolfson's painting **Epiphany** (2008), an abstract canvas that evokes a conflagration of flowers or a diaphanous bouquet of flames. In this work, radiant surges of yellow, red, pink, orange, and white are chromatically tempered by wisps of green, while the image is further deepened and heightened by concentrated patches of blue. Through this play of overlighting colors and underlying forms, **Epiphany** simultaneously evokes and inverts the realms of above and below, of illuminated depths and dynamic surfaces. The title expresses a corresponding sense of epiphany, a transient moment when illumination surges forth in flashes and waves, as a surfacing to consciousness becomes visibly expressed on the surface of the canvas.



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Texture #2**, 2005. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

While **Epiphany** expresses these themes in distinctive pictorial terms, Wolfson's painting **Texture #2** (2005) also conjoins and collapses layers of opacity and transparency, surface and depth. Painted in a warm spectral palette, **Texture #2** displays a mosaic-like pattern of red, orange, and yellow tones that are sparsely intermixed with deep patches of violet. In this abstract canvas, blocky clusters of orange brushstrokes appear to melt and glow like embers in an open hearth. If these combustible energies were exponentially multiplied and dramatically released, the visual effect might resemble the incinerated swirls that form **Conflagration** (2007), the volatile image that now hangs so quietly in a private home.

Gazing into the fictive flames of **Texture #2**, the impastoed edges of brushstrokes appear as the broken characters of an unwritten language, an unscripted script that forms a luminous veil. The blocky golden brushstrokes along the painting's perimeter resemble a flickering frame that loosely encircles the painting's radiant inner reddish core; in so doing, this open halo evokes the abstract presence of an angel in a Byzantine fresco or mosaic. If viewers were to imagine such a luminous figure, then consciously release the image from their minds, they would be holding onto the angel while simultaneously letting it go. Etheric traces of spiraling light could then imaginatively appear as the invisible equivalent of the aniconic icon.

Just as both angels and textures share a structurally homologous position as intermediary presences, **Texture #2** transposes what is visibly shown at or on its surface—the opaque revelation of an epiphanic display—with what is seen when gazing through the shimmering, diaphanous veils that form the flickering field of the painting.[\[footnote\]](#)

As Jeff Kripal has pointed out, these concepts come very close to what Eliade meant by a hierophany. Derived from the Greek prefix **hieros**, which denotes the sacred or holy, and **phainein**, a hierophany is literally a showing of the sacred. See Mircea Eliade, **The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion** (New York: Harvest Books, 1968), p. 11; and Bryan S. Rennie, **Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion** (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

"“oral text”" "with my tongue i write" "what speech could not relate" "in causal chain skipping beat" "tarnished by time that rusts" "oxidation of trust" "breathing to speak" "through mask" "disfigured" "in moon of fear" "this dragon year" "that strangles neck" "and buttons eye" "against wind that winds" "around pole" "dismembered" "in writing of tongue" "dry of ink" "black on white" "creation rewrite" "even in sabbath dawn" "envisioning chariot wheel" "spinning through space" "in motion restrained" "forgotten pleasure / remembered pain" "always differently the same"

Alternating patterns of emergence and recession, revelation and concealment, are expressed on the symbolic surfaces of “oral text,”[\[footnote\]](#) **Epiphany**, and **Texture #2** through language that appears “always differently the same.” Related ideas can also be found in the scholarship on mysticism that discusses the varied texture (**arigah**) of the showing (**phainein**) of the secret and its corresponding concealment. Threading through this multifaceted play of presences and absences, abstractions and figurations, is the philosophical structure of the **coincidentia oppositorum**, or the coincidence of opposites. As Michael Sells has observed, not only is this formulation a characteristic feature of mystical discourses, but one of its most powerful expressions takes the form of apophysis and kataphasis, or the “mystical languages of unsaying.”[\[footnote\]](#) When addressing the radical play of affirmation and negation in kabbalistic gnosis, Wolfson has emphasized the central role of the image “as the **coincidentia oppositorum** that bridges transcendence and immanence, apophysis and kataphasis, invisibility and visibility, and thereby facilitates the epiphany of incarnational forms.”[\[footnote\]](#) When these concepts are translated into visual terms, the apophatic can be seen as corresponding to the receding realm of dissolving forms, while the kataphatic is manifested as the texture of visible appearances. The epiphanic and the diaphanous can also be seen as related aspects of these mutually intertwined concepts, as aestheticized expressions of the saying and unsaying that reciprocally appear and disappear as the forms between forms.

“oral text” appears in **Pathwings**, p. 81.

See Michael A. Sells, **Mystical Languages of Unsaying** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), esp. pp. 1-13.

Wolfson, “*Imago Templi*,” p. 124.

Indeed, such notions of the disclosure of the undisclosable represent a trope within the modern study of the history of religions. The prominent philosopher and historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, once observed that the public revelation of esoteric information by scholars of religion has led to “a period that I would be tempted to call **phanic**. We display in broad daylight texts, ideas, beliefs, rites, etc., which normally should have remained hidden, and access to them reserved only to initiates.”[\[footnote\]](#) Similarly, in the important essay, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism,” the distinguished scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershon Scholem, discusses the ways in which the incomprehensible nature of sacred communication can become comprehensible when approached through a mediating text/ure. As Scholem has observed, “The creative force thus concentrated in the name of God, which is the essential word that God sends forth from Himself, is far greater than any human expression, than any creaturely word can grasp. It is never exhausted by the finite, human word. It represents an absolute which, resting in itself—one might as well say: self-moved—sends its rays through everything that seeks expression and form in all worlds and through all languages. Thus, the Torah is a texture (Hebrew: **arigah**) fashioned out of the names of God and, as the earliest Spanish Kabbalists already put it, out of the great, absolute name of God, which is the final signature of all things.”

Commenting further on the metaphorical textures of written and oral texts, Scholem continued: “As Joseph Gikatilla has set forth in great detail, in the Torah the living texture constructed out of the tetragrammaton is seen as an infinitely subtle braiding of the permutations and combinations of its consonants; these in turn were subjected to more such process of combination, and so on **ad infinitum**, until they finally appear to us in the form of the Hebrew sentences of the Torah.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Mircea Eliade, **Journal III, 1970-78**, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 108-09; quoted in Steven M. Wasserstrom, **Religion After Religion: Gershon Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 33. It should be noted that Corbin himself employed the terms “transparent” and “diaphanous” in his discussion of the showing of the secret, as expressed through the mystical transparency of symbols. In

his study of **Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam**, Corbin noted “the simultaneity of the spiritual sense and the literal sense, of the exoteric (**zahir**) and the esoteric (**batin**). The situation is, in fact: either this simultaneity is not noticed by the profane, in which case the natural sense forms a protective wall against any violation of the sanctuary; or else it is known to the spiritual adept, but in this knowledge itself a transmutation of the natural sense occurs, the covering becomes transparent, diaphanous.”

Corbin is quoted in Wasserstrom, **Religion After Religion**, p. 95.

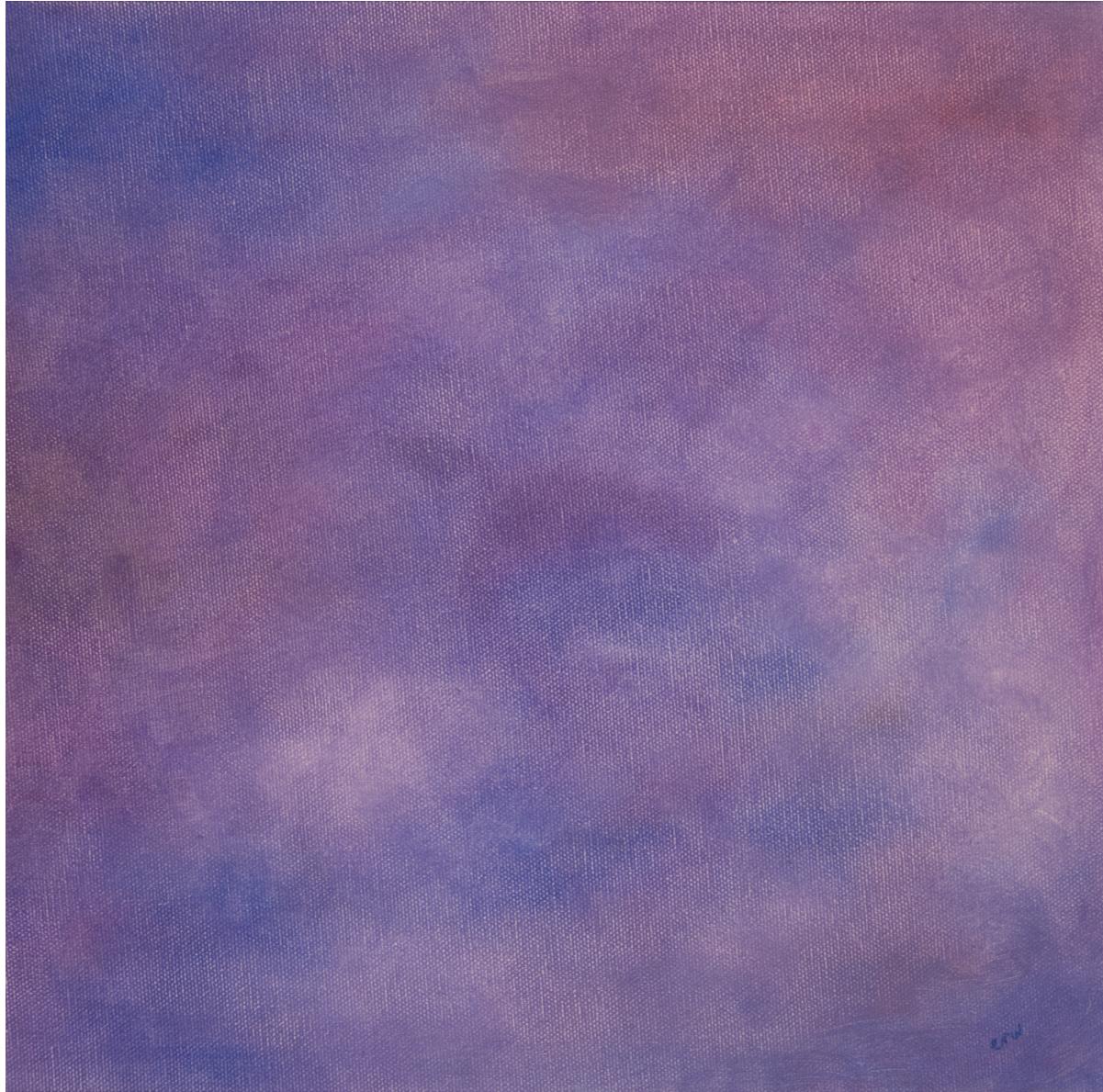
Gershom Scholem, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism,” **The Messianic Idea in Judaism, and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality** (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 293-94.

Thus, as both Eliade and Scholem observe, in mystical traditions language itself is seen as being both epiphanic and diaphanous, as words and images form mediating layers whose textured surfaces can symbolically enable the seeing of the unseen. In turn, Wolfson’s artworks can be seen as engaging a similar set of themes through words and images that form an interwoven fabric of concealed disclosures and diaphanous openings. However, it should also be emphasized that these concepts remain suggestively metaphorical rather than being literal or intentional. When asked about these potential thematic connections, Wolfson responded, “I did not have a conscious thought of the kabbalistic concept of texture (**arigah**) when I painted the painting **Texture**, but if your mind’s eye sees some connection, I would have no difficulty following that line of interpretation.”[\[footnote\]](#) By remaining open possibilities rather than firmly fixed associations, artistic meanings remain elusive and fragmentary, fluid and subtle, like embers that flicker and fade so that their light can express “what speech could not relate / in causal chain skipping beat.”

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, July 26, 2008.

The Painted Heartbeat: On Purple Wings

Chapter Three of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **On Purple Wings**, 2006. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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"“self-reliance”" "the void" "of itself" "fully void" "beckons" "space curve"
"looping round" "time fold" "for us perhaps" "nothing left" "to grasp" "if

only" "we had hands" "bound by" "open faith" "to believe the fiction" "that fiction is no fiction" "but only a tale flesh tells" "in the burning of its flame," "frozen beneath the grave" "of love's resurrection"

Like the looping arcs of “self-reliance,”^[footnote] the fluttering, kinetic surface of **On Purple Wings** (2006) guides viewers through a series of chiasmic curves that are replete with voids and visions, flesh and flames, faith and fiction. Doubling back on one another, the poem and the painting lead viewers up a staircase of acute awareness. The steps follow a long, curving path that winds first to the left, then to the right. For every level that is reached, several stairs must be climbed before attaining the next landing and arriving at a seemingly stable plateau. In the vertical arrangement of “self-reliance,” the words on the page resemble a ladder, just as the internal morphology of the poem pivots on an inverted trajectory in which climbing up entails descending down. As the spectator’s eyes scan the lines of the poem or enter the diaphanous surface of the canvas, they undertake an aesthetic journey through simultaneously rising and falling planes of associations.

“self-reliance” is published in **Footdreams and Treetales**, p. 12.

In the **coincidentia oppositora** of these mutually ascending and descending pathways, the internal rhythms of “self-reliance” and **On Purple Wings** are at once circular and linear, displaying a “space curve / looping round / time fold” that forms the mutually enfolded rings of a chiasma. The intersecting points of the chiasmic curves represent centers of fusion and exchange.

Like so many of Wolfson’s images, **On Purple Wings** appears to be formally apophatic, as the abstraction unsays any literal meanings within a diaphanous space that is abundantly alight with absence, a “void / of itself / fully void” that contains the creative potential of overflowing presence.

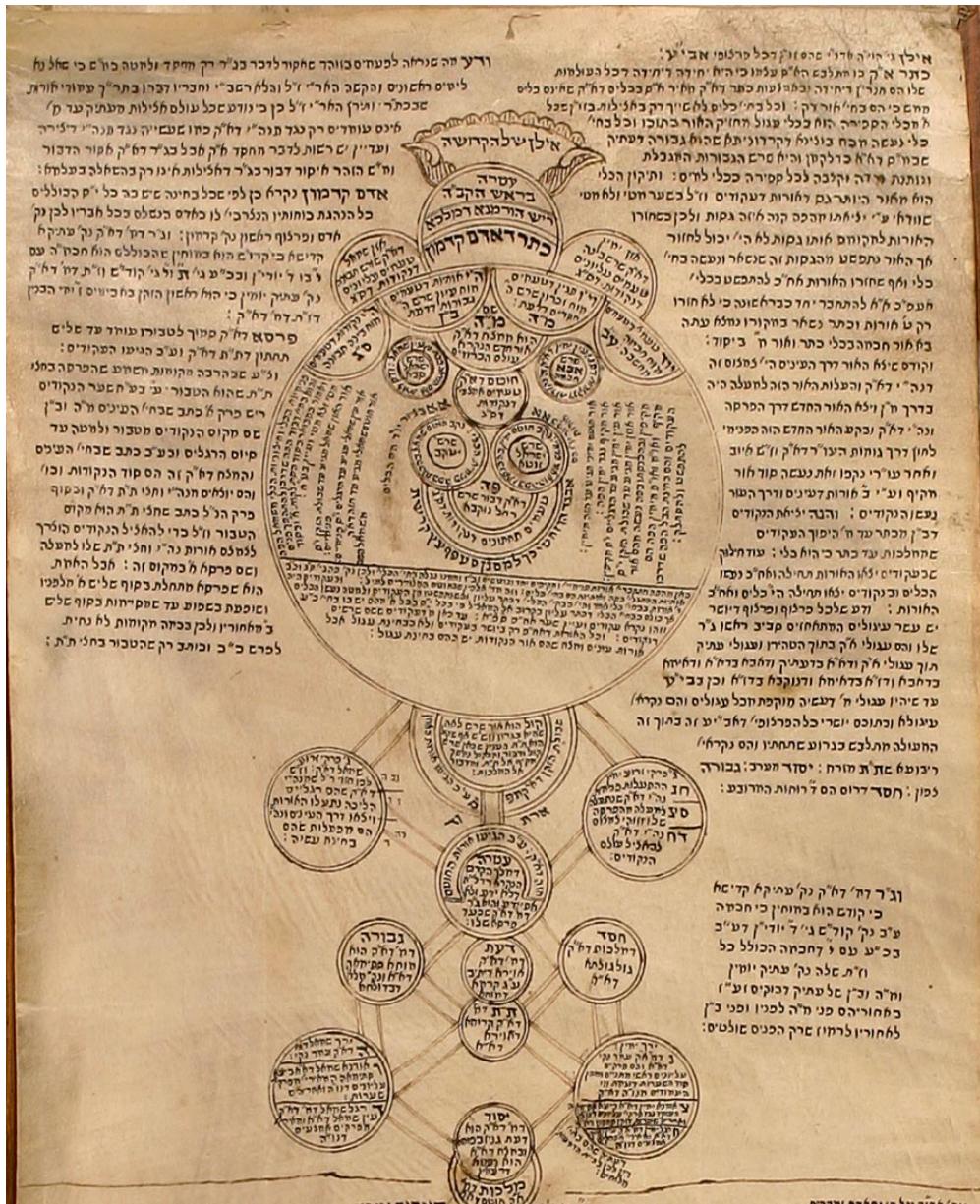
Like Purple Angel and Texture #2, **On Purple Wings** evokes an evanescent angelic presence that is visualized through subtle rings of colored light. Loose fields of cobalt blue, violet, and purple merge with patches of white to fuse into passages that loosely suggest the luminescent forms of floating clouds, radiating haloes, and spiraling wings.

While the significance of the colors in Wolfson’s palette cannot be decisively codified based on the color symbolism associated with

kabbalistic mysticism, it is nonetheless suggestive to note some thematic parallels. Kabbalistic thought identifies ten **sefirot**, or emanations of divine light, which are configured in an anthropomorphic arrangement that is visualized as a schematic human form, or as the symbolic embodiment of the Tree of Life (fig. 7). The emanations are said to issue from **Ein Sof**, the aspect of divine presence known as The Infinite. As Scholem has noted, from **Ein Sof** “emanate the ten **sefirot**, which constitute not only basic attributes of God in His relation to the Creation but active forces and more; emanations of divine light. They represent the creative potencies in God, that part of Him that effects and determines the Creation or, in other words, the living God, which emerges from His concealment and reveals Himself.” Furthermore, Scholem has observed, “The **sefirot** are structured into three triads and one all-encompassing potency. Together they form the Primordial Man, in whose image mankind was created, the tree of the world with its dark soil, roots, stem, and branches, the primordial week of Creation, or the ten words from which the world was created.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Gershon Scholem, “Colors and Their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism,” trans. Klaus Ottmann, in Klaus Ottmann, ed., **Color Symbolism: The Eranos Lectures** (1977; Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2005), p. 21.

Even more specifically, as Scholem has noted, within the chromatic schema of the ten **sefirot**, the sixth emanation, **tif’eret**, is associated with the colors “sapphire-blue and magenta, in which three colors (white, red, and [yellowish] green) are to be united.”[\[footnote\]](#) Positioned at the very center of the Tree of Life—and thus connecting the realms of above and below—**tif’eret** corresponds to the location of the heart, just as this emanation is associated with the attributes of beauty, glory, harmony, and compassion. Scholem, “Colors and Their Symbolism,” p. 30. Regarding the specific shade of green in the tonal triad, Wolfson has noted, “Scholem is right that the last term, **yaroq** in Hebrew, does signify the color green, but I have suspected that it can also denote yellow, and I think in this context, a yellowish green is intended.” Elliot R. Wolfson in correspondence with the author, March 4, 2007.



Tree of Life

With these kabbalistic themes in mind, the abstract imagery of **On Purple Wings** becomes especially evocative. As one gazes at the painting, the upper-right corner of the canvas seems to vacillate between magenta and warm red-violet tones, while the left-hand portion of the painting features cooler shades of bluish purple. Compositionally, the “heart” of the painting

appears as a centrifugal force, a central point for processing alternating currents of radiant energy. As such, **On Purple Wings** can be imaginatively viewed as a symbolic vision of **tif'eret**, as the beating heart of an intersecting midpoint that is connected by fluttering wings whose conjunction marks a pulsing site of fusion and exchange. In the physiological chambers of the heart, red and blue blood flow in a constant cycle of circulation and purification, perpetuating a cleansing and exchange that enables the continuation of life. If the red and the blue streams were to cross and merge, their joining would produce the color purple. Thus, even as the individual parts of the system are structurally differentiated, they ultimately form a single entity, a fountain circulating living energy in the chiasmic crossing of the heart.[\[footnote\]](#)

For a discussion of related imagery, see **Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism**, trans. Robert Powell (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1985), letter 14. I am grateful to Jody Ziegler for bringing this unique book to my attention.

Given the resonance of these themes, it is not surprising that one of the best-known volumes in Wolfson's scholarly corpus is entitled **Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination**. The acronym for **Language, Eros, Being** is LEB, the Hebrew word that signifies the heart, **lev**. While wholly abstract, **On Purple Wings** can nonetheless be viewed metaphorically as a complementary visual translation of **tif'eret**, the light of the heart. With its diaphanous vision of curving voids and enfolded crossings, this painting appears as a heart crowned by beating wings.

Where Light Draws Breath: Green Angel
Chapter Four of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism
and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Green Angel**, 2006. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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The delicate subject of angelic embodiment lends itself well to Wolfson's abstract painting **Green Angel** (2006), and to the lyrical structures of the poem "embodied naked." Situated within an exquisitely paradoxical moment, these fragile apophatic relations unfold in a temporal interval that lies suspended between a quickened sense of anticipation and an overflowing void of time:

"“embodied naked”" "through gate return" "yet to be born," "flowering light" "in silence beyond," "the meadow below," "under which dwells" "empty sign," "laughter of lover," "lurking in touch," "approaching retreat," "fragment unbroken," "echo of word" "never once spoken," "yearning to hold" "what must be scattered," "naked in body, " "fully attired "

The balanced morphological flux of Wolfson's poem generates a constellation of paradoxes, of opposites flickering and fusing into a state of complementary union. To engage the angelic presences symbolically embodied in the poem and painting—to be “embodied naked” yet “fully attired”—thus entails returning to an existence that has not yet begun, even as it is already unfolding. This experience turns on the simultaneous knowledge of sound and silence, emptiness and fullness, eros and alienation, above and below, advance and retreat, wholeness and breakage. Within the resonant aesthetic structures of this **coincidentia oppositorum**, the numinal and phenomenal realms are held in tension, just as they converge in a reciprocal play of “flowering light.”

The literary critic Elaine Scarry has observed that the exceptional vividness of flowers makes them particularly easy to visualize. As a result, flowers “often come to be taken as the representative object of imagining,” just as they are frequently situated, both perceptually and imaginatively, “in the arc between material and immaterial” presence.[\[footnote\]](#) Wolfson presents a thematically related discussion of the creative imagination in a commentary on the philosopher Martin Heidegger, in which he characterizes poetic (and implicitly, painterly) expression as the assemblage of multiple elements into a single time-space. As Wolfson writes of poetic language, “the gifting of the gift accounts for the gathering of the elements into the single time-space that provides the framework (**Gestell**) of what is held together (**Verhältnis**) in the unifying dispersal of what we experience visibly as world.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Much like the aesthetic structures of **Green Angel**, the poetic language of “embodied naked” represents just such a symbolic expression of the human impulse to grasp the ungraspable. The result is a visual choreography of emerging desires and dissolving unions, of “yearning to hold / what must be scattered,” in paintings and poems that shimmer and blossom in seedbeds strewn with light and longing.

Elaine Scarry, **Dreaming by the Book** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 34-44, 62.

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 21.

Wolfson’s artworks thus evoke another highly suggestive, albeit largely unfamiliar term: anthesis. Anthesis signifies both the action and the period in which a flower opens toward the light. Just as anthesis marks the time and space of the opening of flower petals, the term provides an apt metaphor to characterize the interval of time spent engaging intensely with a work of art whose forms blossom and unfold before one’s eyes. In turn, the paintings and poems can be seen as creative arrangements of thought, as bouquets of flowering light that engender the type of contemplative envisioning that brings forth flowers. The philosopher Gaston Bachelard expressed this well when he identified “one of the axioms of the vegetable world’s poetics: flowers, all flowers, are flames—flames that want to be light.” Weaving together this garland of associations, Bachelard observed that consciousness itself can become a work of art, as “this becoming light is what every dreamer of flowers feels; it is brought to life by going beyond what one sees, going beyond reality. The poet-dreamer lives in the radiance of all beauty, the reality of unreality.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Gaston Bachelard, **The Flame of a Candle**, trans. Joni Caldwell (1961; Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), p. 55. I am grateful to Roger Conover for mentioning this study.

Like petals of flowering light, Wolfson’s abstract paintings are razor thin, yet just thick enough to hold everything, as they cradle shifting forms that seem to spring from unseen depths. Their delicate surfaces sometimes appear to vibrate lightly, as if marking the place where light draws breath. The abstract forms of **Green Angel** resemble just such a gently palpitating site. The surface of this painting evokes sunlight beaming through lush foliage, a site where the solid textures of leaves and blossoms become

diaphanous when bathed in a well of light. In this image, two intensely saturated passages of malachite green are suspended on either side of a pale, mint-green vertical axis, which functions as a central hinge conjoining and differentiating the two flanking wings of the composition. Discerning the subtle, hovering presence of the **Green Angel** within the abstract field of the painting again entails the possibility of encountering revelation within non-representation. Surrounding the diaphanous “body” of the angel are radiant fields of golden green that are complemented by scattered hints of orange flame-like wisps; together they form loose tonal veils that oscillate between a verdant background landscape and an open skyscape, an angelic aura and an abstract colorfield.

While presented as a painterly abstraction, **Green Angel**, like **Purple Angel**, is associated with a particular celestial prototype. Wolfson has noted that “the green angel motif was inspired by the figure of Khidr, also vocalized as Khādir, literally, the ‘green one’ (al-khidir, the human/angelic figure in Islamic esoterism who corresponds to Elijah in Jewish folklore and mysticism).”^[footnote] In his study **Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī** (1958), Henry Corbin provides an extended commentary on the Green Angel known as Khidr. As Corbin has observed, Khidr is an “invisible spiritual master, reserved for those who are called to a direct unmediated relationship with the divine world.” Even more specifically, Khidr “is described as he who has attained the source of life, has drunk of the waters of immortality, and consequently knows neither old age nor death. He is the ‘Eternal Youth.’ And for this reason, no doubt, we should discard the usual vocalizations of his name (Persian **Khezr**, Arabic **Khidr**) in favor of **Khādir** and follow Louis Massignon in translating it as ‘the Verdant One.’ He is indeed associated with every aspect of Nature’s greenness.” Regarding this figure, Corbin also quotes^[footnote] from the spiritual autobiography of the Sufi mystic Suhrawardī, who Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, December 18, 2006. Peter Dawkins has further noted that “In Islamic tradition the prophet Idris, ‘the Green One’ or ‘Evergreen,’ is commonly associated with either Elijah or Enoch.” See Peter Dawkins’s entry on “Enoch” for the Francis Bacon Research Trust, <http://www.fbrt.org.uk/pages/essays/essay-enoch.html>. Corbin, **Creative Imagination**, pp. 55, 56, 59-60.

"is initiated into the secret which enables him to ascend Mount Qāf, that is, the cosmic mountain, and to attain to the Spring of Life. He is frightened at the thought of the difficulties of the Quest. But the Angel says to him: "Put on the sandals of Khidr." And his concluding words: "He who bathes in that spring will be preserved forever from all taint. If someone has discovered the meaning of the mystic Truth, it means that he has attained to the Spring. When he emerges, he has gained the aptitude that makes him resemble that balm, a drop of which distilled in the palm of the hand, if you hold it up to the sun, passes through to the back of the hand. If you are Khidr, you too can ascend Mount Qāf without difficulty."'"

Like the prophet Elijah, who is said to have ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot and was transformed into the Archangel Sandalphon, Khidr provides a prototypical vision of a composite human and angelic presence. According to these mystical narratives, the process of "becoming Khidr" is akin to realizing a deep connection to the source within, to the attainment of a spiritual power so great that it has the ability to make flesh translucent, as light itself becomes "embodied naked." **Green Angel** can be seen as a symbolic expression of this transformative state of being, in which the physical solidity of matter dissolves into luminous veils of fluctuating color so light they appear diaphanous, yet substantial enough to mark the visible place where light draws breath.

Inspired by the mystical vision of Khidr, the opaque surface of **Green Angel** can also be seen as a kind of spiritual mirror that reflects an imaginative vision of the spring of life within. In this reciprocal play of veiling and mirroring, **Green Angel** recalls Wolfson's enigmatic, self-reflexive poem "ecliptical":[\[footnote\]](#)

"ecliptical" appears in **Footdreams and Treetales**, p. 83.

"before" "the mirror" "behind" "the veil" "the veil" "behind" "the mirror"
"before" "the veil"

Like **Green Angel**, "ecliptical" evokes a reversible state of being, a dynamic sense of movement in which to go before is to go behind, to go within is to go beyond. The trajectory of the seeking is aptly expressed by the title, which suggests the obscured vision of an eclipse, a celestial event in which one heavenly body is contained within the lights and shadows of

another.[\[footnote\]](#) The term “ecliptical” also evokes the nimbus surrounding planetary bodies that delineate the trajectories of their orbits, thereby marking their presences and absences as the trails of their revolving motions dissolve into pathways of light. The poetic formulation “ecliptical” appropriately mirrors the brevity and circularity of the poem, as this enigmatic word also calls to mind the oval geometrical shape of the ellipse, and the absent words designated by the ellipsis. The ellipsis can be seen as an apophasic element in language, a textual sign that demarcates a place of omission, the white space that contains the presence of absence. Bespeaking nothing while holding the possibility of saying everything, the ellipsis is the visible site where text draws breath.

The term “ecliptic” literally signifies “the great circle of the celestial sphere that is the apparent path of the sun among the stars or of the earth as seen from the sun: the plane of the earth’s orbit extended to meet the celestial sphere.” See **Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary**, p. 262.

The Eros of Flowering Light: Reading The Rose
Chapter Five of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism
and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **The Rose**, 2003. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Within the garden of flowering light, Purple Angel, On Purple Wings, and Green Angel can be seen as aesthetic expressions of a painterly paradox, in which diaphanous surfaces are “embodied naked” yet “fully attired.”

Wolfson’s abstract painting **The Rose** (2003) similarly evokes and eludes the forms of the flesh, in this instance through the radiant imagery of an inverted flower. Such intertwined relations between eros and abstraction can also be discerned in Wolfson’s poem “inside out”:[[footnote](#)]

“inside out” appears in the chapbook **Secrets of the Heartland: 32 Poems by Elliot R. Wolfson** (2004), p. 34.

“outside/ in” “expanding” “to point” “diminishing” “at crown” “of light”
“lusting” “no more” “to see” “but sight” “blinded” “inside/ out”

Much like “inside out,” **The Rose** symbolically embodies a reversible state of being, like the petals of a flower that has turned back on itself, with forms emerging outward from within and inward from without. In this canvas, modulated shades of purple, pink, rose, and white are set against a glowing golden ground, while the swirling forms of the composition evoke a spiraling void. Situated within the feathery nest of the surrounding brushstrokes, the painting’s central vortex appears to be suspended in a luminous tonal field composed of gently blended shades of white, orange, purple, and peach. Just as **The Rose** is an abstract painting, its curvilinear forms suggest not only the open petals of a flower, but the rounded contours of a breast, or possibly the internal form of a cervix, or perhaps the crown of a phallus. In each of these imaginative configurations, the painting appears to make dense flesh diaphanous, as the abstraction evokes and inverts the notion of corporeal transparency, just as the exterior surface of the painting seemingly presents an interior vision of the shifting fabric of enfolded flesh.

The Rose can thus be viewed as a consummately carnal and apophatic expression, an image of the void embracing the void, of flesh encircling flesh. In the elusive, formal structures of the painting, it is difficult to determine what is presence and what is absence, what is masculine and what is feminine, what is flower and what is abstraction, what is solid and what is light. The image presents a provocative vision of the dissolving boundaries and intersecting spheres that frame the undecidable transitions

between inside and out. These meanings become expressed through soft brushstrokes whose edges flicker and fuse as they melt into a mystical and erotic vision of painterly efflorescence. Thus suspended within and beyond gender, the resulting hybrid image simultaneously heightens and dissolves intrinsic differences through the shared caress of a single brushstroke.

Compositinally, the circular forms of the rose are contained within the quadrilateral parameters of the canvas. In kabbalistic sources, this imagery is figured schematically as the erotic leitmotif of the circle in the square, a *topos* that provides the title of another of Wolfson's texts, **Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Mysticism** (1995). As Wolfson has observed, [\[footnote\]](#) in the kabbalistic worldview, Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 188. In this context, it should be noted that, while kabbalistic sources often privilege the assertion of phallic power, attention is also paid to the feminine dimension of the divine in traditional kabbalah, represented most conspicuously in the symbol of **Malkhut** or the **Shekhinah**.

"Human perfection is dependent on the union of the two sexes, for the one that projects requires the space in which to project and thereby be contained. Alternatively, the containment of the male in female is poetically captured in a geometric image found in Sefer ha-Bahir and used subsequently by any number of kabbalists, "the circle that runs within the square." The squared circle conveys gender balance, but from the androcentric perspective that lies at the core of kabbalistic symbolism, the insertion of the tridimensional phallic point (demarcated by the coordinates of length, width, and depth) in the vaginal quadrangle, a union depicted semiotically as the containment of yod in the final mem." "Erotic yearning is marked by the impulse of the masculine will to bestow and the feminine desire to receive. Coitus results in the insemination of the female by the male—the centering of the point in the middle of the square—that comes about through and sustains the containment of the male in the female. However, the latter results in the containment of the square in the circle. At the point in the middle, the midpoint, the locus of the phallus in the womb yields the phallic womb, the extending line of engenderment."

The aesthetic structures of Wolfson's artworks can be seen as at once reflecting and reenvisioning this gendered transition. As Wolfson has written, in kabbalistic texts the rose is figured as an androgynous image, a symbol of the totality of the masculine and feminine aspects of being that reflect the mysterious nature of divine presence. In **Language, Eros, Being**, he emphasizes the importance of "the zoharic image of the rose, as this image in particular can afford us the opportunity to ascertain the mysterious nature of eros and the erotic nature of mystery." The dual aspects of this imagery reflect the principle that "androgyny is applicable to each of the divine attributes."[\[footnote\]](#) At the same time, Wolfson has maintained that, ultimately, kabbalistic "texts do not allow for an undoing of the androcentrism" that is associated with the tradition. Instead, the creative latitude for such interruptions can occur in the aesthetic domain, particularly in elusive works such as "inside out," as "the poems opened a path not available through the philological and textual analysis of the sources."[\[footnote\]](#)

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 63. On these themes, see also Wolfson's essay "Rose of Eros and the Duplicity of the Feminine in Zoharic Kabbalah" in Michel Conan and W. John Kress, eds., **Botanical Progress, Horticultural Innovation and Cultural Changes** (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection and Harvard University Press, 2007).

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, May 9, 2007.

Given the complexity of these associations, it should be emphasized that the multifaceted imagery of **The Rose** and the lyrical fluidity of "inside out" are creatively hybrid and decidedly unstable. Through the painting's multiform displacements of corporeality, **The Rose** can be seen as a symbolic embodiment of the successful failure of gendered oppositions, and thus as incorporating elements that are "differently identical in a manner that is identically different, a knowing that exceeds the bounds of knowing by the phallic axis of duality."[\[footnote\]](#) Neither male nor female, **The Rose** is potentially both and neither—thus embodying a powerful **coincidentia oppositorum** in which painted flesh simultaneously crystallizes and dissolves as it becomes clothed in the transformational act of becoming one's opposite.

Wolfson, **Open Secret: Post-Messianic Messianism**, typescript p. 734.

Regarding such intricate dynamics of gender difference, Wolfson further notes “the gender blurring in the poems. It is never clear who is he and who is she.”[\[footnote\]](#) The poem “friday’s hymn”[\[footnote\]](#) also embodies the intertwined paradoxes associated with such ambivalent (re)pairings: Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, May 6, 2007. “friday’s hymn” appears in **Footdreams and Treetales**, p. 5.

“pour oil on my head,” “before the burning ends,” “let us rise to count the minutes,” “to dot the hours,” “let us rise to wake the children” “who must bury the dead.” “night approaches day,” “neither black nor white,” “her sun is my moon”

Underpinning Wolfson’s various creative formulations are powerful conceptions of reciprocity and reversal; taken together, they hold the potential to inspire an ongoing dynamic of saying and unsaying that leads to androgynous exchanges of flowering light. Thus, whether evoking the morphology of human anatomy and its potential interchangeability within the erotic encounter, or the imaginary image of the inverted flower—itself the sexual organ of a plant, and most flowering plants are hermaphroditic—the forms of “inside out,” “friday’s hymn,” and **The Rose** continually appear to emerge outward from within and inward from without, just as their centers remain at once sheltered and exposed in the embedded layers of their own unsaying.

Unsaying Eros: Fractured Androgyn

Chapter Six of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism
and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Fractured Androgyn**, 2006. © Elliot R.
Wolfson.

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If **The Rose** can be viewed as a symbolic embodiment of corporeal complementarity—a **coincidentia oppositorum** that coalesces into a complex pictorial expression—then the androgyny of the painting can be located in the ambiguous eros of its own unsaying. A slightly later painting, **Fractured Androgyn**e (2006), both reproduces and reverses these themes in another instance of symbolic double mirroring, one that can be seen as an unsaying of eros.

At the outset, it is helpful to provide some brief background on the concept of the androgyn. Like the angel, the androgyn is a culturally and historically specific construction, even as this figure represents a recurrent—albeit decidedly unstable—motif in ancient myths, classical sources, and modern artworks. As I observe in my study, **Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum**, “The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the word derives from the Greek **andros**, or ‘man,’ and **gune**, or ‘woman.’ Taken together, the conjoined term signifies ‘male and female in one,’ and thus, ‘a being uniting the physical characteristics of both sexes; a hermaphrodite.’[\[footnote\]](#) The expanded entry on ‘Androgynes’ appearing in the **Encyclopedia of Religion** notes that, in ‘the visual image, androgynes may be horizontal (with breasts above and a phallus below),’ such as often found in Hindu typological images of the Shiva/Shakti androgyn, or ‘more often, vertical (with one side, usually the left, bearing a breast and half of a vagina, and the other side bearing half of a phallus)—such as in the morphological typologies that recur in alchemical texts. The entry continues: ‘Androgynes may be regarded as...symbolically successful, when the image presents a convincing fusion of the two polarities...that is, when it is [not] a mere juxtaposition of opposites [but] a true fusion.’[\[footnote\]](#)

The Oxford English Dictionary, vol. 1, p. 452.

Wendy Doniger and Mircea Eliade, “Androgynes,” in **Encyclopedia of Religion**, vol. 1, p. 337. See also Doniger O’Flaherty’s extended discussion of this typology in **Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 283-334. In this study, Doniger distinguishes the “negative chaos” associated with splitting androgynes from the “positive chaos” connected with fusing androgynes. In

particular, while splitting androgynes must be severed in order to be creative, fusing androgynes typically consist of a male and a female created in isolation who then must fuse. Significantly, she also notes that the figure of the androgyne can alternatively represent ecstasy or barrenness, just as the typology can simultaneously express love in union or in separation.

“Perhaps most significantly, the figure of the androgyne is central to biblical accounts of the first human being. According to the Book of Genesis, on the sixth day of creation, ‘So God created man in his [own] image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them’ (Genesis 1: 27).[\[footnote\]](#) Thus the biblical image of the original human being—the initial anthropomorphic schema of Adam—represents a figural typology of gender dimorphism in which the female is contained within the male.[\[footnote\]](#) Beyond Old Testament texts, androgynes appear in classical sources as cosmic embodiments of the duality and the union of the sexes. In Plato’s **Symposium**, for example, the androgyne is characterized as a ‘third sex’ incorporating a union of man and woman, a ‘being whose double nature’ is imagined as conjoined in a circular body. These mythic creatures were later severed by the gods and divided into two parts, thereby establishing the ancient desire for ‘reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man.’[\[footnote\]](#) In both classical and modern accounts, the androgyne variously appears as a mystical figure of wholeness and fragmentation, of sacrality and transgression, whose metamorphic processes of separation and reintegration mark the fractured limits and the interwoven boundaries of humanity itself.[\[footnote\]](#) Throughout its various incarnations, the androgyne thus instantiates extraordinary states of being that engender an ambivalent sense of difference within, and beyond, difference.”

Slightly later, in the account of the creation of woman from the rib of Adam, readers encounter a figure who “shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Genesis 2: 23).

For an extensive discussion of this trope, see Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, ch. 4.

In the Platonic account, the androgyne occupied a circular body that could walk upright, backwards, or forwards, or “roll over and over at a great pace.” See Plato, “The Symposium,” in **Dialogues**, trans. Benjamin Jowet,

Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1955), vol. 7, p. 157.

The androgyne is also a recurrent figure in medieval and early modern mysticism, as well as in German Romanticism, Symbolist and Decadent imagery, and modernist artworks ranging from Balzac and Baudelaire to Brancusi and Klee. Moreover, as Patricia Mathews has observed, during the **fin de siècle** the androgyne served as a prevailing image that “denied sexual difference: the nondesiring but desirable androgyne” whose presence signified a “transcendent body...[that] offered an alluring promise of imagined wholeness and coherency in the face of the decentered, unboundaried experience of modernity.” See Patricia Mathews, **Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 111, 114.

The complex distinctions between juxtaposition and fusion shed valuable light on Wolfson’s various creative formulations of the androgyne. Within his textual scholarship, Wolfson has presented extensive discussions of the concept in kabbalistic sources. In **Language, Eros, Being**, he recounts the commentary of the early fourteenth-century kabbalist Isaac of Acre, who instructed his readers to “Contemplate how primal Adam was created two-faced, neck opposite neck, equal in power and one in actuality. Afterwards ‘he took one of his ribs’ (Gen. 2: 21) from his side, that is, one of his parts...and from one two were made, and even though they are two, they are one, as it says, ‘and they will be one flesh’ (ibid., 24). His attention is constantly directed to her and her attention is constantly directed to him, and his wife is as himself, ‘for this one was taken from the man’ (ibid. 23), understand this.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 62.

Thus, according to the biblical myth as it is enhanced in the medieval symbolism of the Zohar, in an original state in the garden of Eden, Adam contained within himself the unity of two aspects of being, male and female. As Wolfson notes, kabbalistic sources view the union of heterosexual marriage as a means of re-establishing this state of wholeness, “which occasions the restoration of the female to the male and the consequent reconfiguration of the primordial state of androgyny wherein gender difference is eradicated.”[\[footnote\]](#) Moreover, in “the cooperation of

these two attributes, the making of balances is made possible because Adam was created androgynous, but the nature of androgyny is decidedly masculine, for the left was contained in the right; on account of that containment one attribute can be refracted, enclothed, and merged in its opposite.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 166. It should be noted that questions of integration and reparation are complex and controversial. On these subjects, see especially Gershom Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” in **The Messianic Idea in Judaism**, pp. 1-36; and Moshe Idel, **Messianic Mystics** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 171.

As noted above, when approaching Wolfson’s abstract artworks, viewers cannot assume a ready cosmological parallel between the earthly and the heavenly domains, the upper and the lower realms, such as expressed in the schemata of kabbalistic symbolism. Indeed, Wolfson’s artworks elude any such pre-established or formulaic correspondences. At the same time, his poetic description of the androgynous being as a being that is “refracted, enclothed, and merged in its opposite” provides a suggestive point of departure for a discussion of the painting **Fractured Androgynous**. As is so often the case in Wolfson’s oeuvre, this canvas features a glowing array of abstract green and gold forms that appear to contain multiple presences within the painting’s dynamic visual field. The component forms of **Fractured Androgynous** read like an elusive form of hieroglyphics, as the image’s fragmented play of stains and traces again evokes an unwritten language inscribed on a soft golden ground, one in which pictorial characters are composed of spectral traces of flowering light, such as in the green orchid-like form that appears to blossom along the upper-right corner of the canvas.

Notably, both the left and right sides of the composition display concentrated pockets of green that are at once separated and conjoined by a central passage of pearlescent white. This intermediate verdant space marks the location where the artist has visibly placed the light in the canvas. United by an underlying golden background, the two sides of the composition are thus clearly differentiated, just as they engage in a sustained reciprocal dialogue. In the central field of **Fractured Androgynous**,

two barbed, calligraphic brushstrokes evoke the mutual, grasping gestures of hands that don't quite touch, even as the curving contours of these outstretched limbs continually gesture towards one another. Thus in the luminous, dialogical space that at once separates and conjoins these adjacent forms, the components of **Fractured Androgyn**e are united by the abyss of their reciprocal distance. Paradoxically, the painting achieves a sense of pictorial and thematic balance through forms that continually reach for one another without quite touching. Throughout the canvas, **Fractured Androgyn**e's luminous pictorial field is thus envisioned through the propinquity of its brokenness, a state of internal fragmentation that provides the compositional underpinning of the work's formal integrity.

"“re/pair”" "dis/oriented" "the jew" "on edge" "of blade," "rending garment" "mourning" "shining" "this midnight" "as king" "enters garden" "to eat" "of poison" "in heart" "bleeding" "from blade" "laid beneath" "tear in cloak, " "threaded" "by pain"

Like **Fractured Androgyn**e, “re/pair”[\[footnote\]](#) poignantly interweaves unraveled strands of integration and impossibility. Indeed, Wolfson has noted that “the poems (and less so the paintings) display a great deal of darkness and suffering.”[\[footnote\]](#) Thus it is significant that the painting is not entitled **Androgyn**e, but **Fractured Androgyn**e, as the fracture itself is a notably dialogical structure. Like the ambivalent morphology of the splitting and fusing androgyn, a fracture inscribes a tear in the fabric of being as it marks a seam that can never be fully “re/paired,” even as it tells its equivocal story of rupture and joining.

“re/pair” is published in **Secrets of the Heartland**, p. 17.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, May 9, 2007.

Oneiric Coils: Serpent's Dream and Pistis Sophia
Chapter Seven of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Serpent's Dream**, 2007. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Imagine that you are sitting with a Native American teacher, who gives you the exercise of assembling a ceremonial pipe. You are presented with several individual pipe sections, and you experiment with fitting the various components together. As you try different formations, you realize that the

pipe can be assembled in a variety of ways. Each configuration will yield a distinctive implement, and each will accomplish its work in a unique manner. You are then presented with some ceremonial tobacco. As you place the tobacco into the pipe, you realize that the pipe and the tobacco represent distinctive elements of a reciprocal ceremonial structure, one whose typically invisible bonds suddenly become visible as the smoke rises all around you.

Wolfson's canvas, **Serpent's Dream** (2007), loosely evokes this vivid ceremonial imagery through smoky, ethereal forms that are painted in a southwestern, "Native American" palette. At first sight, the painting may appear vertically bifurcated, as a central dividing line seems to demarcate the left and right sides of the composition. Yet when the picture is viewed at close range, this subtle optical barrier dissolves, and the two sides of the painting flow together as a single form. Just as contemplative immersion facilitates such creative transformations, the painting appears to be a kind of shape shifter, a formally unified construction in which distinctive passages become fluidly interchangeable, thereby lending themselves to multiple symbolic arrangements. Recalling the imagery of a medicine dream, the painting displays sidereal shades of red, maroon, orange, and violet, which appear as fluctuating clouds of colored light. Three oval patches of bright emerald green—mysterious elements that suggest a disembodied, primordial gaze—float freely at the center of the canvas.

Just as the shifting surface of **Serpent's Dream** resembles a diaphanous veil of open sky, the underlying composition displays internal configurations of interlaced forms. Examining the canvas closely, it is possible to discern subtle traces of a helix structure, a spiraling coil that resembles an uroboros, a twisting serpent swallowing its own tail. Just as the verticality of the snake becomes circular within the swerving conventions of the iconography, the uroboros represents an archetypal image of androgyny.[\[footnote\]](#) Conjoining these associations, the title of Wolfson's painting, **Serpent's Dream**, symbolically evokes this complex coil of interwoven significations.[\[footnote\]](#)

For Wolfson's discussions of the uroboros in relation to kabbalistic thought, see **Language, Eros, Being**, pp. 67-68, 271.

Along these lines, Wolfson has characterized dreams as transitional, hybrid states that are often marked by the coalescence of opposites. In an analysis of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Habad texts, which themselves drew on earlier kabbalistic thought in their engagement with dream imagery, Wolfson has observed that “the oneiric imagination is privileged, as the way to reach the unknowable and unnameable is through the mental faculty that combines opposites and thus points to the mystery of equanimity, the state of indifference wherein opposites are identical in their opposition.” See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Oneiric Imagination and Mystical Annihilation in Habad Hasidism,” **ARC, The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University** 35 (2007), pp. 131- 57.

With its embedded sense of internal multiplicity and its abstract depiction of the varieties of oneness, **Serpent’s Dream** displays the paradoxes of an “open enclosure”: [\[footnote\]](#)

“open enclosure” appears in **Pathwings**, p. 92.

“in time” “that measures” “fissures & faith” “flowering” “on dreams”
“dispersed” “ ”

“one is” “not one” “unless it is” “more than one” “ ”

“in time” “that measures” “fortune & fate” “flickering” “on fury”
“infuriated” “ ”

“two is” “not two” “unless it is” “less than two” “ ”

“in time” “that measures” “foot & face” “floundering” “on paths”
“divergent” “ ”

“three is” “not three” “unless it is” “more or less three”

Like the layered coils of a clay pot, **Serpent’s Dream** and “open enclosure” can be viewed metaphorically as spiraling configurations that incorporate and disperse flickering forms through porous surfaces of permeable containment. Another of Wolfson’s artworks that engages these themes is **Pistis Sophia** (2007), an abstract painting resembling a luminous bouquet of scattered, disembodied forms. Painted in bright shades of gold, blue,

green, and purple, swirling clouds of mass and light evoke a coupling that is born of three. The title of this painting literally signifies “Faith in Wisdom.” In particular, **Pistis Sophia** is the name of an ancient gnostic gospel and, as Wolfson points out in **Language, Eros, Being**, this trope refers to a mythic triad found in the Nag Hammadi text **Eugnostos the Blessed**. In the latter context, **Pistis Sophia** represents a mystical image of the divine pleroma that conjoins the presences of the father, son, and daughter. In his analysis of this gnostic imagery, Wolfson notes that “the pairing of son and daughter, the Savior and Sophia, or Pistis Sophia, as she is also called, produced six androgynous spiritual beings in the pattern of the first androgynous man. The twelve powers, six male and six female, beget seventy-two powers, the totality of the six contained in each of the twelve, and each one of the seventy-two powers reveals five powers, to yield a sum of 360 powers, the union of which is called the ‘will.’”^{[\[footnote\]](#)} The erotic union of Pistis and Sophia thus engenders powerful androgynous imagery that incorporates complex mystical and numerological associations, as the **coincidentia oppositorum** of the bonding of “more or less three” generates exponential spirals of light.

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 157.



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Pistis Sophia**, 2007. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

Traversing the open boundaries of convergence and divergence, Wolfson's poems and paintings display distinctive pathways that melt and merge in the disintegrating patterns of oil on canvas or words on a page. Like the distinct indistinctiveness of the pipe and tobacco, the poems and paintings can be seen as offering androgynous visions of interchangeability, protean configurations of dreams that are diaphanously clothed and ephemerally dispersed on smoky coils of burnished light.

“Breaking Brokenness” and Splitting the Difference: Marriage
Chapter Eight of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism
and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Marriage**, 2006. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Wolfson's androgynous images take many forms. If [**Serpent's Dream**](#) evokes the radiant panoply of light at sunset, **Marriage** (2006) is as dense

and dark as the nighttime sky. Indeed, **Marriage** is a “black painting,” an image that features an extremely dark palette of concentrated shades of green, orange, and purple. The composition is decisively split by a vertical seam or place of “re/pair,” a barrier of blackened gold that runs down the center of the painting. Gazing at the surface of the painting, occluded presences again seem to emerge and dissolve, alternatively evoking the outlines of angels and beasts, masks and clowns, the overlapping silhouettes of children and adults, the skeletal presences of ghosts and specters, traces of hands with splayed fingers, and images of upturned faces staring imploringly upward. When taken together, **Marriage** reads at once as an impenetrable veil and a transparent window opening onto its own inner world.

In **Marriage**, the central barrier element resembles the flame of a candle, a slender, tapering wall of flickering light. Extending from the top to the bottom of the canvas, this form evokes an unbridgeable divide, an impenetrable membrane, or an unbreakable hymen. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida has observed, the hymen represents a highly ambivalent symbol of separation and conjunction, a site where (sexual) difference becomes inscribed as mutually enfolded yet decidedly undecidable.

[footnote] This ambiguity is possible precisely because the term hymen carries paradoxical sexual connotations. A hymen is a thin veil of tissue located at the entrance of the vagina that serves as a marker of female virginity; yet just as this tissue is ruptured during the physical act of lovemaking, the term hymen also denotes the consummation of the marriage act itself. As such, it signifies a site of joining **and** of separation. Sustaining both meanings (and thus neither) simultaneously, the hymen is a veil or partition that divides two subjects, demarcating their status as discrete individuals, just as it marks their union in an undivided state of being.

See Jacques Derrida, “The Double Session,” in Peggy Kamuf, ed., **A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). For a discussion of the philosophical implications of the motif of the hymen, see Kamuf’s “Introduction: Reading Between the Blinds,” esp. pp. xxxvix-xl.

Reflecting this double play, if one steps back and then returns to the painting, its forms seem to shift once again. Like the pictorial composition of [**Green Angel**](#), the central barrier of burnished light in **Marriage** can be seen symbolically as the body of an angel whose luminous wings radiate outward toward the left and right sides of the composition. The divide is then no longer merely a divide, as it can be viewed metaphorically as the central axis of an abstract figural presence. As is the case throughout Wolfson's complex oeuvre, the image does not give of itself immediately; rather, it is necessary to engage in a sustained reflective process in order to perceive multiple visions that reveal themselves at a later stage of disclosure. Depending on one's angle of vision, the blackened, impasto brushstrokes display a luster that can either absorb or reflect light. The material substance of the painting thus embodies a paradox that transcends the conditions of its own internal division, as the barrier potentially emerges as a site of joining, as golden-white light flashes within the darkened expanse of the black canvas. Or, following Wolfson's account in **Language, Eros, Being**, the androgynous figure can be seen as incorporating and revealing a "desire for transcendence [that] embraces the eros of the impossible."[\[footnote\]](#) These ambivalent themes gesture towards an unattainable, yet somehow symbiotic, union of asceticism and eroticism. **Marriage** thus appears to plot a course through thick and thin, as expressed through an aestheticized **coincidentia oppositorum** that displays a sense of difference fused beyond differentiation.

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 289.

With its complex sense of division beyond division, **Marriage** resonates with "time in the tomb," a poem Wolfson wrote in Jerusalem in 1984:

[\[footnote\]](#)

For a thematically related poem, see "there was a time," in **Footdreams and Treetales**, p. 40.

"there was a time" "we washed the eye" "to enter key" "without lock"
"lurching" "where poem" "used to be" "vision muted" "become word" "to
open lock" "without key" "turning" "love into law" "in booth" "we build"
"from memory" "and expectation"

The “booth” referenced in this poem refers to the **sukkah**, a temporary dwelling built to celebrate the week-long Jewish harvest festival. This symbolic space commemorates the provisional shelter of the Jews during their wandering in the wilderness. Like **Marriage**—and like the human body itself—“time in the tomb” can be viewed symbolically as a provisional shelter that houses transient light. Indeed, “time in the tomb” can be seen as instantiating the poetic space of a multiple dwelling, an impermanent structure composed of numerous planes that unfold in various directions simultaneously. The path of movement across the boundaries of time and language can be seen as a washing of the eyes, a refreshing of vision that occurs when one steps back to take a breath and then returns to gaze again. This associative clustering of time, booth, lock, and tomb evokes the gendered forms of an archetypal womb, yet in this nostalgic poem, this poignant space bespeaks a loss that remains highly ambivalent, at once necrologically (en)crypted and provisionally gestational. In a coextensive positioning of eros and thanatos, life and death emerge as antithetical yet homologous sites. The reversible parameters of Wolfson’s poetic **sukkah** thus seem to house life in death and death in life.

Like **Marriage**, “time in the tomb” harbors an ambivalent space where law can be “turned back” and returned to love. The gift of the poetic imagery accompanies the realization that one can venture beyond the confines of the shelter and return to it freely, so that the movements of entering and exiting, turning and returning, become symbolically analogous to an act of love-making. If unrecoverable in reality, this union endures in the fragile shelter of symbolic dwellings built “from memory / and expectation.”

Erasing Inscription, Inscripting Erasure: Palimpsest
Chapter Nine of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism
and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Palimpsest**, 2006. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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If the visualization of angelic embodiment can be imagined as a creative process of “embody[ing] that which is not a body” and “giv[ing] form to the formless,” then both a reversed **and** a complementary version of these concepts can be seen in the painting **Palimpsest** (2006). **Palimpsest** so completely incorporates a diaphanous state of paradox that, on its surface, each painterly gesture represents an act of erasure, just as each erasure is itself a painterly gesture. To paraphrase another of Wolfson’s poetic formulations, the painting can be seen as an act that unfolds in seemingly

opposite directions simultaneously, as it inscripts erasure while erasing inscription.

The term “palimpsest” derives from the Greek word **palimpsētos**, which means “scraped again.” In practical usage, a palimpsest refers to a writing surface, such as a piece of paper, parchment, or canvas, that has been used multiple times, thereby displaying previous inscriptions that have subsequently been erased. Characterized by residual traces of “ghost” presences (**pentimenti**), a palimpsest can be imaginatively envisioned as a graveyard of living forms. To actively paint a palimpsest is to paint what has been unpainted, as the painting performs a disappearance of its own appearance, an apophatic saying of its own unsaying.[\[footnote\]](#) Thus to produce a palimpsest is to undertake a form of negative writing—or, in this instance, negative painting, an act that creates a presence by removing a presence. And with this unpainted painting, **Palimpsest** writes another chapter in the unwritten book of flowering light.

As Wolfson has commented, **Palimpsest** “was one of the canvases with which I had to struggle, and to this day, I am not sure at all how the canvas received the paint in the way it did. But you are right that it is a form of apophatic writing.” Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, December 1, 2006.

Palimpsest is a dark and complex painting, and its scraped facade may initially be difficult to look at. The subtle, polychrome surface displays a range of densely textured brushwork, with visible layers of dry brush scraping evident throughout the canvas. The surface of the painting thus exhibits the process of its own (un)making, of being painted, over-painted, and unpainted, as shades of darkness are emphatically asserted and subsequently removed. The result is a fluttering, “negative” white form that seems to hover aerially in the dark “positive” field of the canvas, a ground so deeply purple that it emerges through warm shades of blackened maroon. According to Wolfson, this painting was inspired by an idea in an ancient alchemical text, in particular, the magical image of “blood so red, it was black.” As we have seen, the practice of painting itself has been described as a form of alchemy, as symbolically marking a surface with oil in order to effect the transmogrification of form. Thus in the depths of its formal and

symbolic structures, **Palimpsest** erases and encodes the underlying mystical principle of the **coincidentia oppositorum**.

When one gazes at its scraped and brushed surface, the painting appears not only as a monolithic dark field or impenetrable void, but as an intricate fabric or veil whose shifting, interwoven patterns are reminiscent of a piece of antique lace. Following the embedded patterns of the palimpsest, the surface of the canvas displays underlying forms that could evoke the outlines of an ancient etching, or perhaps a parchment displaying the ghosts of antique cityscapes, or the whispered silhouettes of figures that might have appeared in illuminated manuscript decorations or as the cartoon designs for stained glass windows. Throughout the painting, (in)visible forms remain highly unstable, constantly changing their internal configurations through an ongoing play of recession and emergence.

As this suggests, abstract painting represents an especially powerful site for creating such presences that are absences, and absences that are presences. When constructing an abstract image, a single brushstroke simultaneously entails the articulation of the image and the eradication of the image. The inscription of the paint mark is thus a gesture of erasure, just as this erasure is itself a mark of inscription. In this way, the abstract paint mark is at once iconic and iconoclastic, and in this (non)dual state, the artwork lies suspended in a dialogical space of “image and imagelessness.” Or, to adopt Wolfson’s kabbalistic turn of phrase, abstract painting’s dynamic visualization of the formlessness of forms can be seen as a pictorial translation of “innumerable forms of formlessness” that can represent “the garments by which the unseen is manifest in the hiddenness of its disclosure.”[\[footnote\]](#)

See Elliot R. Wolfson, “New Jerusalem Glowing: Songs and Poems of Leonard Cohen in a Kabbalistic Key,” **Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts** 15 (2006), pp. 121-22.

Another way to envision these contemplative arrangements is to imagine light falling through a lace curtain as it projects a shadow onto a background wall. Or, depending on where you happen to be standing and what you are holding in your hands, the openwork patterns of the lace may fall onto the surface of your own body, or onto a blank canvas or sheet of

paper. In all instances, the cuts in the fabric correspond to the absence that allows for an evanescent play of light. Imagine then that the curtain moves softly as a breeze blows through an open window. The designs shift on the breath of the air current, just as the open frames of the lace become like the ellipses of an unfinished sentence, a space where light draws breath, and radiance takes shape in the darkness. Immersed in this aerial flow, you see the shifting patterns of light simultaneously designing and dissolving the language of an unwritten text.

Just as **Palimpsest** displays a painterly field in which vision appears to be “scraped again” to reveal the absent presences of what came before, the canvas also echoes what never came to be. Like the shifting light through the lace curtain, the emergent vision is the obverse of what is seen: ascending from the traces of its own erasure, the fragmented images embody the imprint of what was always, and never, left behind. In **Language, Eros, Being**, Wolfson similarly comments on the notion of the palimpsest in the natural world when he observes that “we can speak hyperliterally of the cosmos as the book of nature, that is, nature as the palimpsest on which the erasure of the ineffable is erased in the inscribed traces of what appears, apparently, as real.”[\[footnote\]](#) Threading through the chiasmic loops of the palimpsest, the viewer is left gazing at the presence of absence through an erasure that is the sign of its own creation.

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 8. Or, as Wolfson writes elsewhere regarding “the no-showing that is the spectacle of mystical vision,” such as in the ineffable name, “The originary text is a palimpsest from its inceptional inscripting/erasure—the multiple readings etched on its surface constitute the writing-over, the spectrality of the invisible emerging from beneath the layers of the visible, the disclosure of truth in the concealment of image through the concealment of truth in the disclosure of image.” See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality: The Use of Models to Study Continuity and Discontinuity in Kabbalistic Tradition,” **Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies** 6 (Winter 2007), esp. p. 149.

As this suggests, the complex visual dynamics displayed within this physically diminutive yet conceptually powerful painting are profoundly apophatic, as writing and unwriting, painting and unpainting, are figured

not as oppositional states but as distinctive aspects of a singular form of creative expression. In the ambivalent mark-making that comprises Wolfson's painterly facture, the removal of pigment enables a revelation of the underlying traces of what came before, which subsequently reveal themselves as formative aspects of what is (not). Thus resonating with alchemical and kabbalistic symbolism, **Palimpsest** encodes the mystery of unmarking in the visible language of the mark. In so doing, the abstract structures of the painting can be seen as an invisible reflection of "prayertrace," [\[footnote\]](#) an apophatic poem that makes its mark while covering its tracks:

"prayertrace" is published in **Footdreams and Treetales**, pp. 55-56.

"to walk" "without trace" "to speak" "without voice" "to hold" "without grasp" "to be done" "in the undone" "to be seen" "in the unseen" "to be born" "in the unborn" "this," "my will," "fulfill" "o mother," "hollow be your name," "overflowing" "knowing" "the unknowing" "my lips leap" "to empty" "emptiness" "to break" "brokenness" "to hope" "hopelessness"

Much like the painting of a palimpsest, in this lyrical poem of erasure—
itself a structural inversion of The Lord's Prayer—the reader encounters an entreaty to emptiness that seeks to attain a state of overflowing plentitude. In their abstractness, both the painting and the poem reflect a desire "to be seen / in the unseen," a vision that emerges through its own erasure—much like the ecliptical intervals and hollow depths that distinguish painterly alchemy and poetic utterance.

Breaking Paths of Broken Light: Luminal Darkness
Chapter Ten of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism
and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Luminal Darkness**, 2005. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

[missing_resource: <http://rup.rice.edu/flowering-buybutton.jpg>]

Complementary themes of retention and surrender, holding on by letting go, are evident in Wolfson's paradoxical painting **Luminal Darkness** (2005),

and in his poem “arrow & bow”:

“broken vav,” “unutterable,” “too dense” “to judge” “subtle truth” “like spider dance” “on circumference” “judgment stand” “to disarm” “to disown” “alone” “to break” “arrow” “by bending” “bow” “to take” “hold” “by letting” “go”

With its opening reference to the “broken vav”—a fractured version of the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet [[footnote](#)]—the poem begins by conjuring a torn hinge, a broken joint, a snapped wishbone. Yet this fractured character creates a new letter in the unwritten language of flowering light. Upon doing so, Wolfson’s poetic imagery shifts to another form of language-making, a web spun from the gossamer footsteps of a spider, while the weaver stands alone at the edges of his own story. This simultaneously eccentric and concentric vantage point marks the solitary place of creation, just as this imagery signals a break with those who would break others. Following the fragmented path of these lyrical threads, viewers encounter the final image of the archer and bow, a figure whose actions create a release through an act of surrender. Arrow & Bow, Alef & Beit, A & B: the beginning that comes before, and after, the beginning. Like the bristles of a paintbrush and the threads of a canvas, the strings and feathers of the bow and arrow are instrumental tools of self-creation in a poem where patterns of language arise as webs of broken light.

As Lawrence Kushner notes, the vav signifies “the sound of being joined. And vav is the sound of and. One and other.” See Lawrence Kushner, **The Book of Letters: A Mystical Alef-Beit** (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1990), p. 35. I am grateful to Gregory Kaplan for bringing this source to my attention.

At the heart of these interwoven yet fragmented strands lies a sense of “luminal darkness.” Wolfson’s scholarly writings offer important clues as to the significance of this cryptic phrase. When discussing the hermeneutics of light in medieval kabbalah, Wolfson has noted that sacred texts and contemplative practices are characterized by “the mystical articulation [that] is pushing beyond the limits of language to speak the ineffable: The light that is seen in the concealment of darkness is the word that is written by being erased.” [[footnote](#)] In this palimpsest, apophasis and kataphasis

are, once again, intimately conjoined to form an aesthetics of the impossible that strives to express the inexpressible: a light so bright that it can only be seen as darkness, as luminal darkness.

Elliot R. Wolfson, “Hermeneutics of Light in Medieval Kabbalah,” in Matthew T. Kapstein, ed., **The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 110.

This elusive imagery also calls to mind the early kabbalistic view of the oral Torah as a white fire written on black fire, and the written Torah as a black fire written on white fire. In the essay “The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism,” Gershom Scholem cites the writings of Rabbi Isaac the Blind, who “interprets the fiery organism of the Torah, which burned before God in black fire on white fire, as follows: the white fire is the written Torah, in which the form of the letters is not yet explicit, for the form of the consonants and vowel points was first conferred by the power of black fire, which is the oral Torah. This black fire is like the ink on the parchment.”

[\[footnote\]](#) In a volume of essays notably entitled **Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature** (2007), Wolfson translates and analyzes a related zoharic text. When engaging this imagery, he emphasizes the mutual containment and reintegration of seemingly

oppositional elements into a single field of being in “the primordial Torah [that] was written as black fire upon white fire. ‘R. Isaac said: The Torah was given as black fire upon white fire in order to contain **the right in the left, so that the left would be restored to the right**, as it says, ‘From His right hand a fiery law unto them’...R. Abba said: The tablets were before their eyes, and the letters that were flying about were visible in two fires, white fire and black fire, to show that the right and left are one.’ The Torah ‘comes from the strength [the left] and is contained in the right.’”

[\[footnote\]](#) Gershom Scholem, “The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism,” **On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism**, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 49. On these themes, see also Scholem’s

discussion in “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism,” p. 295. For discussions of the gendered meanings ascribed to the written and oral Torahs, see Wolfson’s study **Through A Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Elliot R. Wolfson, **Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature** (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. 14.

Another way of envisioning these invisible relations is to return to the disembodied colors of the **sefirot**, the luminous emanations that are configured in anthropomorphic form in the [Tree of Life \(fig. 7\)](#). As Wolfson has observed, “To contemplate the worlds [of the **sefirot**] is equivalent to envisioning the multiple forms through which the formless takes shape. The process of representation in the imagination proceeds...[through the visual channel, with] the dark-light of the infinite fracturing into a rainbow of color.... Worship, understood kabbalistically, is an expression of poiesis, the art of form-making.”[\[footnote\]](#) Thus in contrast to theophany, or the epiphanic manifestation of divine presence, the concept of luminal darkness can be understood as a diaphanous reflection, a type of visionary blindness. While theophany conveys a sense of knowing through the visible manifestation of revelation, luminal darkness can be conceptualized as a complementary form of gnostic blindness, a sense of knowing through unknowing, seeing through unseeing. As Wolfson states in **Language, Eros, Being**, “the mystic vision is a seeing of **luminous darkness**, a vision of unseeing through the mirror of the infinite...that is, a seeing through which one comes to see that one cannot see, the blindness that is true insight.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Wolfson, “New Jerusalem Glowing,” pp. 148-49.

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 217.

Like the paradox of “luminal darkness,” the painting bearing this title can also be seen as a blank book of many colors. Once again, Wolfson paints the disappearance of appearance through a radiant cascade of prismatic light. The painting displays intense tonal contrasts that span the visible color spectrum, incorporating shades of reddish orange, golden yellow, warm green, and midnight blue, which mingle with soft tones of peach and rose and melt into patches of indigo and violet. Taken together, the painting’s darkened light casts a mysterious glow, like the fluttering wing of an iridescent angel. Gazing at the shifting, fluid contours of the jewel-like painting, one can symbolically discern an angelic form with an upturned face emerging from the central cascade of violet and white light, an etheric figure with radiant orange wings and a flaming golden heart. Ultimately,

however, the painting remains formally elusive. Just as counterpoised configurations of swirling light give form to the formless, they instantiate the formlessness of forms. Thus, much like **Purple Angel**, iconographic evocations form a dissolving reflection, a vanishing embodiment of disembodied presence. In so doing, **Luminal Darkness** can be approached metaphorically as an apophatic mirror, a refracted surface on which color appears as the whispered trace of white light viewed through faceted panes of broken glass.

The prismatic forms of broken light appearing in **Luminal Darkness** also resonate thematically with the Lurianic kabbalistic theory of the **kelippot**, the husks or shells of solidified forms containing the divine spark that seeks release in the act of repair. Notably, Wolfson also discusses the theme of demonic shells in **Luminal Darkness**. In an essay on the relations between good and evil in zoharic texts, Wolfson considers the ways in which the adoption of a nondual perspective can enable a process of integration, just as “the ethical demand that evil be contained in the good mirrors the ontological principle of **coincidentia oppositorum**.^[footnote] He concludes, “From all the texts that we have examined, a clear pattern has emerged. The spiritual path that is the most complete is one that incorporates evil as well as good. The conceptual ideal in the Zohar is the dialectical relation that exists between the demonic and the divine. That is, the former is rooted in and sustained by the latter.” One of the evocative images used to express this **coincidentia oppositorum** is that of the kernel and the shell, symbols that variously represent good and evil, the inner and the outer realms, and the containment of light within darkness and darkness within light—that is, luminal darkness. Interlinking these associations, Wolfson observes that “the task of **homo religious** in the Zohar is not the separation of the holy spark from the demonic shell, but rather inclusion of the latter in the former.” In so doing, “the purpose of religious life is not to liberate the spark of light from its demonic shell in order to separate the two realms...The goal, however, is to contain the left in the right. To see the light through darkness—that, according to the Zohar, is the ultimate perfection.”^[footnote]

Wolfson, **Luminal Darkness**, p. 39.

Wolfson, **Luminal Darkness**, pp. 41-45. On these themes, see also Scholem, “Kabbalah and Myth,” p. 114; and Isaiah Tishby, **The Wisdom of**

the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Thus, while wholly abstract, **Luminal Darkness** can be approached as a resonant visual translation of the eponymous themes of nondual integration, as a prismatic bridging of light and darkness. As a portrait of the chromatic spectrum viewed from the perspective of breakage, **Luminal Darkness** floats at a midpoint centered between, and incorporating, the polarities of darkness and light. In so doing, vision itself becomes an act of holding on by letting go. That is, just as black represents the combined presence of all colors in the visible light spectrum, white can be seen as the inverse manifestation of color as expressed through its visible absence in a pristine state of unbrokenness.

Just as the prismatic spectrum represents the range of color available to the human eye, the earthly condition can be seen as an existential expression of living in a state of “broken light.” As Wolfson has noted, in kabbalistic sources the prism is associated with the sacred imagery of the **Shekhinah**, the final emanation of the **sefirot**. Thus Wolfson translates the following zoharic passage (1: 203a): “Come and see: ‘The valley of vision’ refers to **Shekhinah**, who was in the Temple, and all of the people of the world would draw the sustenance of prophecy (**yeniqu di-nevu’ah**) from her. Even though all of the prophets prophesied from another place, they drew their prophecies from her, and hence she is called ‘the valley of vision.’ ‘Vision’ (**hizzayon**)—it has already been explained that it is the prism (**heizu**) of all of the supernal colors.” As a reflective vision of the prismatic rainbow, Wolfson observes, “**Shekhinah** is assigned the title ‘prism’ for she corresponds to both the archetypal image in the sefirotic world, which is cast more specifically as the image of the anthropos Israel, and to the human faculty of the imagination that affords one access to that image.” [footnote] Reflecting this enfolded doubling of broken light, “the prism can only be seen through the prism.” [footnote]

Wolfson, “**Imago Templi**,” pp. 134-35.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, July 21, 2007.

Etymologically, the word prism means “to prize,” to saw or break apart. Thus the prize of vision and the vision of the prize—the visible gift of the

rainbow—is the result of the fragmentation of white light that makes the invisible visible. In turn, black can be seen as the copresence of all things, as color appears as the additive product of multiple tonal overlays. Symbolically “re/pairing” these broken threads, **Luminal Darkness** can be viewed as an aesthetic translation of this doubled vision, of holding on by letting go.

The Festival of Flames: Flaming Light
Chapter Eleven of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Flaming Light**, 2006. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Painted during the Hanukkah season, **Flaming Light** (2006) symbolically embodies a festival of flames. This brilliant canvas erupts in a luminous fountain of color, as hot, sweet shades of orange, pink, white, yellow, red, and magenta flamboyantly surge upward, while subtle traces of sky blue are visible through the tissue of flames. The painting's modulated brushstrokes create the effects of swirling color and wafting smoke, which become transmuted into a stream of ascending radiance. The painting thus abstractly evokes the imagery of an illuminated candelabra, a ceremonial vessel of light. [\[footnote\]](#)

For an evocative comparative image of a lit menorah, see the illuminated manuscript page that Giulio Busi reproduces in **Qabbalah Visiva** (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, editore, 2005), p. 185.

As so often occurs with Wolfson's artworks, a host of ethereal, insubstantial presences appear to emerge within the flickering configurations of the colored flames as one gazes at the painting. Yet the presences remain characteristically fragile and highly unstable. Sometimes entire faces seem to appear in the flaring light, while sometimes only eyes shine in the radiance. Resonating with the continual disappearance of these evanescent apparitions, Wolfson has noted that, in the Zohar, the **sefirot**, or luminous emanations, are sometimes described as faces, particularly the Faces of the King. He has further observed that the individual candles of the menorah, the Hanukkah candelabrum, are seen as corresponding to the emanations. Kabbalists have commented on the significance of the menorah being molded from a single piece of metal, just as it holds an array of individual lights. As Wolfson has observed, the design of the Hanukkah candelabrum thus embodies a paradoxical state of being "many but one," as a multiplicity of light is contained within a structurally unified edifice.

When asked whether a particular angel is associated with the ceremonial candles lit during Hanukkah, Wolfson mentioned Nuriel (or Uriel), the Archangel of Light. Associated with prophecy, wisdom, and alchemy, Uriel's attributes include a flame of knowledge held in his open hand, and an urn of golden light that he pours down onto the earthly domain. Returning to more familiar, experiential parameters, if one were to stare at a

lit candelabra and allow his or her gaze to soften and solid shapes to dissolve, individual forms would blend and blur, perhaps appearing like the many faces of light glowing within the surface of the painting. The resulting vision of flaming light evokes the radiance flowing from Uriel's urn, just as the painting can be imaginatively envisioned as an abstract image of an angelic vessel, as a downpouring that is also an upsurge of the many faces of light.

Holding onto this vision of light burning between worlds while simultaneously letting it go, **Flaming Light** can be juxtaposed with Wolfson's thematically related poem, "festival of light":[\[footnote\]](#)
"festival of light" appears in **Footdreams and Treetales**, pp. 38-39.

"in darkness" "truth glow" "behind" "the shadow" "of thirst" "cast" "like stone" "on sea" "of bliss," "before" "the light" "but after" "the darkness" "belong" "ray of hope" "glistening" "within" "cloud" "of doubt," "we rise" "to weep" "and weep" "to rise," "above" "the pain," "beyond" "the pleasure" "where love" "is lost" "to be found," "excess" "of joy" "limited" "by woe," "overflow" "despair" "the moment" "repair," "a skeleton" "this time" "in garment" "of grief," "tormented" "by truth" "that mutter" "deceit," "holy" "the fury" "of the" "fiery chill," "the flame" "that kindle" "passion's fluidity"

Much like **Flaming Light**, in "festival of light" viewers encounter a smoldering blaze where glowing flames become all the more visible as their radiance is seen through a curtain of falling darkness. Simultaneously diaphanous and epiphanic, both the poetic and the visual images invite their viewers to go within their depths **and** to gaze at the light pouring through their surfaces. Melting and fusing these internal and external domains of illuminated shadows, it is difficult to turn away from the intensity of the flames. Indeed, while gazing at the painting or reading the poem, viewers may find that they have fallen into the angelic urn.

To Write the Cut: The Circumscription of (E)met
Chapter Twelve of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **(E)met**, 2004. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Imagine that you are moving through a landscape filled with softly diffused, golden light. The flowering light becomes an almost tangible presence that surrounds you like a gentle mist. You then come upon a sacred building, a structure composed entirely of open, interconnected archways. As you gaze at the light reflecting off the façade, you notice that the surfaces of the building's arches appear as mosaics composed of multicolored stones. As you continue to look at the building, the individual stones seem to change places. The building's interior space appears as an animated pattern of color and light, even as the schematic silhouette of the conjoined archways remains stable. The building thus seems to be somehow solid yet insubstantial, stable yet dynamic, constantly reconfiguring itself anew. Viewed symbolically, the building could be the architectural equivalent of an angelic hierarchy, as sacred forms are translated into three-dimensional spaces, each angel a brick in a living temple of light.

The etymology of the word “hierarchy” derives from the Greek prefix **hieros**, which means sacred or holy; and **archēs**, which designates an arch. The primary definition of “hierarchy” in **Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary** is “a division of angels.” The word “hierarchy” also designates arrangements of power and authority in various professional domains, including in the ranks of the clergy and government, as well as the assemblage of persons or objects into ordered series.[\[footnote\]](#) Yet placing the seemingly fixed structure of the hierarchy in motion changes and expands the meaning of the term. Individual positions are no longer fixed but mobile, thereby allowing the hierarchy to be inscribed anew. See the entry on “hierarchy” in **Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary**, p. 392.

Such an imaginary reconceptualization of hierarchy can be seen as a purposeful act of transgression, perhaps even a “hypernomian” one. As Wolfson explains in **Venturing Beyond**, the concept of the hypernomian references a structure that lies beyond duality, and thus a state of being that exists beyond established categorical dichotomies or received metaphysical dualisms.[\[footnote\]](#) As such, the idea of the hypernomian resonates with the image of the animated arch. Typically, an arch is a curving architectural

element that spans an opening while establishing a materially supporting base. The arch thus simultaneously encompasses positive and negative spaces, grounded and aerial perspectives, which are, in turn, associated with the container and the contained. Archways are also portals that represent points of entry and exit, boundaries that separate the domains of within and beyond. Placing these dynamic terms in motion, an arch (**archē**) not only represents a “beginning” or “point of origin,” but also an endpoint or conclusion. The archway is thus a place that is unified yet multiple, a threshold where the beginning becomes the end, and the end the beginning.

Alef, Mem, Tau.

Regarding the concept of the hypernomian, see Wolfson, **Venturing Beyond**, ch. 3.

Completing the circle by leaving it open—if one were to conjoin beginnings and ends—the resulting formation might resemble an arch connected with another arch, a structure whose peak has been conjoined with its base, whose top has merged with its bottom, to form a configuration that inverts and erases any sense of hierarchy. The arch thus completes itself in the form of an enclosed loop, a structure that turns on the open possibilities of its own circularity. With these connections in place, the hierarchy can again be envisioned anew, as the **hieros archēs** is transformed into the serpentine spiral of the androgynous uroboros, as in [Serpent’s Dream](#), or the erotic intertwining of the **hieros gamos**, as in [The Rose](#).

Wolfson’s abstract painting (**E**)met (2004) represents another complex meditation on mythic language, ritual temporality, and ancient magic. In this painting, angels again appear to be embedded within the impalpable arching silhouettes of other angels. Inscribed across the heart of the image are the Hebrew letters **alef, mem, tau**. Together they form a text that simultaneously denotes truth and death, meanings that become visible through the cut forms of the painting’s symbolic flesh.

Alef, mem, and tau are the initial, middle, and final letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Wolfson’s book **Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death**, is devoted to exploring the symbolic meanings of these characters. In this study, he examines the complex ways in which the letters represent the phases of the beginning, the middle, and the end, and thus

correspond to the spiritual states of creation, revelation, and redemption. At the outset, he emphasizes, “the rabbinic teaching that the word **emet**, ‘truth,’ comprises the first, middle, and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet: **alef**, **mem**, and **tau**. These letters serve, in turn, as semiotic signposts for the three tenses of time: past, present, and future.”[\[footnote\]](#) When commenting on the thematically related painting **(E)met**, Wolfson has further observed, “There is a kabbalistic teaching that if you remove the **alef**, which is emblematic of the one (the numerical equivalent of the letter **alef**) and which spells **EMET** or truth, you have **MT**, and thus, you are left with death.”[\[footnote\]](#) Among its many meanings, this evocative formulation suggests that rational truth without a mystical dimension is dead. Preserving the dual significations of truth and death, the **alef**—the cursive character that appears at the right of the textual inscription—is suggestively clouded over so that these multiple meanings are simultaneously possible. Palpably infusing these associations with a corporeal dimension, Wolfson has scripted the letters in red pigment, as if metaphorically wounding the body of the canvas and exposing its open cuts. In so doing, he makes the painting’s typically opaque “skin” diaphanous, so that the positive and negative spaces of flesh and blood become symbolically interchangeable.

Elliot R. Wolfson, **Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. xi.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with the author, August 1, 2006.

Wolfson further elaborates on the relations between time, language, and corporeal manifestation in his book, **Open Secret: Post-Messianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson**. In the Postface, Wolfson discusses “the rabbinic idea that the consonants in the word for truth, **emet**, comprise all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, **alef** the first, **mem** the middle, and **tau** the end.... This tradition alludes to the linear character of worship, the straight line of emanation that extends from consciousness to the attributes, that is, from the intellect to the sensations, and then to the garments of thought, speech, and action, until the light extends to the corporeal, and all things are actualized in their actuality.”[\[footnote\]](#) Further extending this curving trajectory in his scholarly discourses on temporality, Wolfson has formulated a conception of time that he calls “the open circle of linear

circularity,” an idea that encompasses “the future to be recollected in the past that is to be anticipated.”[\[footnote\]](#) This conception of the open circle of time at once incorporates notions of an open future and an open past, the latter of which is reshaped in part through engagement with historical texts.[\[footnote\]](#) And, one might imagine, through encounters with abstract paintings that offer mystical reflections on historical time.

Wolfson, **Open Secret**, typescript p. 737.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, May 10, 2007.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, April 17, 2008.

While highly abstract, **(E)met** is also thematically related to the golem tradition in Jewish folklore. Literally meaning “unformed mass,” golem is the Hebrew term for a homunculus or artificial animate being that a powerful human fashions from inanimate matter, such as earthen clay. Through magical processes, such as incantations, the golem is brought to life by its creator. While designed to serve their masters, golems can become dangerous and may need to be destroyed. Gershom Scholem relates the story of the scholar and mystic Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague who, after constructing his golem, “finally put a slip of paper into its mouth with the mystic and ineffable Name of God written on it. So long as the seal remained in his mouth, the Golem was alive.” Yet when it became necessary, the rabbi “stretched out his arm and tore the Holy Name out of the Golem’s mouth, whereupon the Golem fell to the ground and turned into a mass of lifeless clay.” Scholem further notes that the golem “is nothing but a replica of Adam, the first man himself,” whom God created from clay and subsequently invested with a spark of life.[\[footnote\]](#) In a further essay on “The Idea of the Golem,” Scholem emphasizes “the etymological connection between Adam, the man created by God, and the earth, the Hebrew **adamah**.[\[footnote\]](#) He then relates Jakob Grimm’s description of the golem, on whose forehead is written **emet**, or truth. Yet as the golem grows larger and gains strength, “for fear of him, they [the Polish Jews] therefore erase the first letter, so that nothing remains but **met** [he is dead], whereupon he collapses and turns to clay again.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Gershom Scholem, “The Golem of Prague and the Golem of Rehovot,” in **The Messianic Idea in Judaism**, pp. 335-36. On this subject, see also Moshe Idel, **Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid** (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

Gershom Scholem, “The Idea of the Golem,” **On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism**, pp. 159-60.

Quoted in Scholem, “The Idea of the Golem,” p. 159.

While closely related to the golem tradition, **(E)met** carries its energy so ethereally that its cocoon of painted matter becomes transformed into a diaphanous veil of colored light. Formally, **(E)met** displays a subtle configuration of layered presences. At the outer edges of the canvas, spectral shades of blue, green, and white appear to form a high-value skyscape, a palette that reflects the colors of clouds at sunrise and sunset. These outer layers of modulated blue and green hover behind a central presence that is loosely composed of radiating clusters of forms. These forms appear as a series of interconnected archways, or mutually contained haloes that emerge through veils of warm orange and muted red and purple. Two patches of silvery-white pigment appear at the foot of the canvas, like a pedestal of light that serves as a radiant base for abstract figural presence. Scripted in saturated red letters that seem to be haloed in white light, the characters **alef**, **mem**, and **tau** appear across the heart of the swelling form, while a flame-like wisp extends upward from the base of the canvas. Interposed between the **alef** and the **mem**, the flickering white light plays a dual role: it can be seen as symbolically representing the cogeneration of the golem’s animating spark of life, while simultaneously preserving the possibility of death through occlusion and erasure.

As this suggests, the highly ambivalent energies of the painting seem to pull in opposing directions simultaneously, as the viewer’s gaze is drawn both vertically and horizontally across the surface of the canvas. These tensions create a visual trajectory of linear circularity that forms the sign of the cross. In turn, the symbolic body of the (non)figural presence appears as a fluctuating silhouette or swirling vessel of light that descends from above and emerges from below. Just as the expanding and contracting outlines of the central form radiate vertically through the painting’s center, the letters cut across the surface of the canvas are read horizontally, sequentially, and symbolically from right to left, as they transect the midpoint of the painting in an enclosed narrative of truth and death.

Another compelling translation of these spiraling, cruciform themes can be found in Wolfson's poem "sabbath bow":

"cursed" "be one" "blessed" "with test" "to circumcise" "circumcision" "of flesh" "inflected" "through" "word" "wavering" "confession" "of submission" "circumcised" "in heart" "infested" "cliché" "placated" "on plate" "breaking" "passion" "punctuated" "pain" "pinning" "spine" "spinning" "on poles" "of pleasure" "i receive" "in recollecting" "circumcision" "of tongue" "twisted" "time" "fleeting" "as bow" "remembered" "in forgetting" "the forgotten" "like christ" "babbling" "in pentecost" "passion" "breaking" "open" "place" "beyond place" "forsaken" "forgotten" "circumcision" "of circumcision" "in submission" "of confession" "deflecting" "inflection" "of what was" "what would" "not be" "remembered" "or forgotten"

Like **(E)met**, "sabbath bow" reads like an aesthetic expression of ritual praxis, a sacramental cutting that reveals the life within the life. Both artworks seem to raise the question of how much can be cut away so that wounds can be viewed as open windows, while the resulting visions appear as curtains of light that bleed beyond their own boundaries as they carry the color that flows between worlds. Both the painting and the poem incisively question the place of words as anodyne inscriptions, just as they raise the question of how much or how little needs to be present in order to be present. In so doing, both artworks trace the path of an interstitial subject cutting across a field of consciousness, while "deflecting / inflection / of what was / what would / not be / remembered / or forgotten."

The poetic imagery of "sabbath bow" also recalls God's promise to Noah after the flood: "And God said, 'This [is] the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that [is] with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a token of a covenant between me and the earth'" (Genesis 9: 12-13). Wolfson has noted that the poem "sabbath bow" "was inspired by seeing a rainbow on Friday evening, and the rainbow is an object of vision, and, in kabbalistic sources, linked to the phallus."[\[footnote\]](#) He has also commented on the shared kabbalistic underpinnings of "sabbath bow" and **(E)met**, notably that "**emet** (the word spelled by the letters **alef, mem, tau**) is 'truth,' and

specifically the seal of the divine inscribed on the flesh by the cut of circumcision. This covenant is also symbolized by the sabbath and the rainbow.”[\[footnote\]](#) Thus in both the painting and the poem, Wolfson performs a kind of meditational circumcision, a circumcision of vision, peeling away layers in order to reveal a vision that typically remains invisible. As such, the poem and the painting can be seen as embodying an ecstatic sacrifice of language symbolically performed through a process of excision, of cutting away veils in order to allow invisible visions to emerge. Invested with these sacred associations, the poem simultaneously reads like a resurrected song and a psalm of resurrection. Compositionally, the rhythms of both the painting and the poem evoke the transverse forms of the cross cut by spiraling patterns of circles within circles. Taken together, this formation may be characterized as a lyrical form of “circumscription,” a kind of circular writing that traces an “ecliptical” journey, as words and brushstrokes metaphorically cut through a veil that falls between worlds.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, September 11, 2006.
Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, August 14, 2006.

By the Light of Our Wounds: Inkblod
Chapter Thirteen of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Inkblod**, 2006. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Like ink spreading on a blotter, associations of life and death seep across the intensely modulated surface of **Inkblod** (2006). This painting

symbolically evokes the creative morphology of light bleeding through matter, of corporeal transparency made visible through the delicate membranes of diaphanous tissues. Metaphorically, it seems as though the surface of the canvas is bleeding, offering its vision through an outpouring of diffuse stains of melting light.

The painting features nuanced shades of red so profound that they somehow seem to be light and dark at once, and thus another study of “luminal darkness.” As in so many of Wolfson’s paintings, a delicate white form with flaming, outstretched wings appears at the center of the composition, emerging through layered washes of crimson and scarlet. A corresponding shadow presence, composed of contrasting shades of deep orange and dark walnut brown, echoes the contours of this pearlescent figure. Formally and symbolically, this coupling of light and shadow creates a presence within a presence, and thus another ambivalent expression of doubled light.

While the painting is wholly abstract, the themes of blood and ink, light and shadow, life and death are mutually transposed to form another painted vision of the **coincidentia oppositorum**. Once again, these ambivalent images represent complex leitmotifs in kabbalistic sources. As Wolfson has noted, “[Abraham] Abulafia readily acknowledges that there is an intense battle in the heart between form and matter, spirit and body, intellect and imagination, depicted metaphorically as blood and ink, but he also relates that he had the capacity to transform the lethal drug (**sam ha-mawet**) into an elixir of life (**sam ha-hayyim**), a transmutation that is possible because life and death share a common source.” [\[footnote\]](#) **Inkblood** also resonates strongly with the textual accounts of the Archangel Gabriel and the letter **tau**, which Wolfson recounts in **Alef, Mem, Tau**. In particular, he links a biblical account of the letter **tau** to “the vision in Ezekiel (9: 4-6) where ‘the men who groan and moan’ because of the abominations committed against God in Jerusalem are marked on their foreheads by the ‘man clothed in linen with the writing case at his waist.’ The individuals so inscribed are instructed by the angelic man to slay all those who are guilty. Compliant with the biblical text, the mark (**tau**) empowers the faithful so that they may participate in the dispensation of divine judgment.” Wolfson pairs this story with a second zoharic interpretation, an exegetical commentary positing that “the ‘man clothed in linen’ refers to Gabriel, who was commanded by

God, ‘Go and mark the foreheads of the righteous with a **tau** of ink so that the angels of destruction will not prevail over them, and [place a] **tau** of blood on the foreheads of the wicked so that the angels of destruction will prevail over them.’”[\[footnote\]](#)

Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” pp. 160-61.
Wolfson, **Alef, Mem, Tau**, p. 160.

In various sources, the Archangel Gabriel is associated with the color red. In an important essay on “Colors and their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism,” Gershom Scholem quotes a zoharic passage that relates a divine vision of the colors of the rainbow to the presences of the archangels, with “Michael on one side, Gabriel on another, Raphael on a third—these are the colors appearing in that **image**: white, red, and green. **So was the appearance of the surrounding radiance**” [emphasis in original].

[\[footnote\]](#) Wolfson also discusses this kabbalistic imagery in **Through a Speculum that Shines**, in which he translates the following passage: “And so there are angels when an individual mentions their names he must focus on them by means of the imaginative faculty, and imagine them in the form of human beings. Their faces are faces of flame, and their whole bodies a raging fire, some are white fire, some green fire, and some red fire, it is all according to the imagination from which they derive.”[\[footnote\]](#) Thus in various accounts of angelic presence in the creative imagination, the Archangel Gabriel is associated with the flaming imagery of blood, ink, and fire.

This text comes from **Zohar**, 1.181-b, and is reproduced in Scholem, “Colors and their Symbolism,” p. 38. Scholem also comments on the ambivalence of the color red as a dual signifier of life and death, noting that, in biblical sources, red is the color of sin and blood, yet “In many passages of the Torah, blood is the bearer of the soul, that is, life.” He also notes that the color white can signify the “‘luminous garbs’ of the angels mentioned in the angelological literature” (pp. 12, 31).

Elliot R. Wolfson, **Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 318.

Inkblood can be seen as symbolically evoking the etheric imagery of the Archangel Gabriel, the messenger of life and death who inscribes human

flesh with fluid strokes of ink and blood. The absorptive power of the painting lies partly in the ambivalent power of an angelic presence who hovers elusively within a diaphanous veil of darkness and light, and thus remains suspended between form and formlessness, life and death, while conjoining these seemingly oppositional states of being. Just as **Inkblood** is awash with these fluid significations, the image of Gabriel appears as two faces of a single angelic presence, the one who marks the oneness of two. In particular, the etheric imagery associated with the Archangel resonates with the doubled narrative of destruction and preservation, of sanctity and corruption, as the sign of life is angelically inscribed in **tau**, the final character of death. Throughout these narratives, blood provides a means of record-keeping, as blood is light, and light is language. In turn, **Inkblood's** dissolving abstract structures aptly provide an imaginative framework for representing what cannot be represented, the diaphanous epiphany of angelic embodiment.

Inkblood can also be read as a complementary translation of the sacrificial offering that appears in Wolfson's poem, "cum grano salis" ("with a grain of salt"):

"o mistress mine" "meandering mind" "through mist divine" "hiding hiddenness" "too hidden to hide" "beneath the cloak" "crumble the clock" "abiding abidance" "too abiding to abide" "bloodstain of christ" "by saline thirst" "rising to expire" "in pot of ice" "and pit of fire" "desiring not" "but not to desire"

Taken together, the painting and the poem read like extremely concentrated states of extremes, ecstatic compressions of ascetic experience in which energies swirl and cascade immersively. "cum grano salis" brings its readers to a place where blood, sweat, and tears all turn to salt, and humanity dissolves in a ubiquitous flow, extinguishing distinctions until the experience becomes one substance. In a turn of phrase that turns beyond totality, the poetic title "with a grain of salt," evokes an exaggerated sense of all but nothingness, a gesture that encompasses everything in the sacrificial embrace of the void.

“Working from the Other Side of the Clouds”: Broken Landscape
Chapter Fourteen of Marcia Brennan’s Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Broken Landscape**, 2003. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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During a visit to Alaska, Wolfson found himself contemplating an exquisite cloud formation. Gazing up at the sky, he suddenly had the sense that he was “working from the other side of the clouds.”[\[footnote\]](#)
Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with the author, August 1, 2006.

This expressive phrase aptly characterizes the painting **Broken Landscape** (2003), an abstract canvas that represents an ethereal study of the falling depths of ascending light. While wholly nonrepresentational, the painting

again evokes the letters of an unwritten language woven in a palette of firelight and projected onto the celestial vault of the sky. A dense cluster of cursive, flame-like forms appears along the right-hand side of the canvas, where they form a loosely constructed lattice that seems to generate radiant sparks that have splintered off to illuminate the central and left-hand sides of the composition. In a reversal of accustomed figure-ground relations, **Broken Landscape** thus inverts the terrestrial and the celestial domains, as the sky becomes an ungrounded ground that seems to support a flickering constellation of embers. Treading the ether of this “broken landscape,” the viewer walks an unwalkable path. Navigating the field of the abstraction is much like interpreting the characters of a half-forgotten language, or reading an unscripted story set on the shifting ground of an open sky. As though depicting an unwalkable journey, this abstract canvas looks like a landscape illustration produced to accompany a book of unwritten light.

Like so many of Wolfson’s artworks, **Broken Landscape** presents a scene of contemplative beauty, just as it poignantly maps a terrain of brokenness. These affective themes have a profound resonance with the mystical poem “flashing seal/seventh palace”:[[footnote](#)] “flashing seal/seventh palace” appears in **Pathwings**, p. 59.

“words are wings woven” “by tongue & tooth” “drawing breath & opening lip—” “i AM not root nor branch,” “father or son,” “i have come in time” “spoken by wheel,” “i have come to walk” “but, alas, there is no path”

Wolfson’s poem expresses the burden of walking an unwalkable path through a broken landscape. Yet for all of their burning shadows, the poem and the painting contain a radiance that shines in multiple directions simultaneously. Much like **Palimpsest**, **Broken Landscape** and “flashing seal/seventh palace” create a path by erasing a path.[[footnote](#)] In so doing, the artworks can be viewed as portraits of a light that knows no boundaries, just as they maintain illuminated connections in an otherwise disconnected world. Like mystical lanterns, Wolfson’s paintings and poems can be seen as a metaphor for such kabbalistic transmission, as aesthetic expressions that attempt to keep light alive in a broken world.

Barbara Galli presents an extended discussion of the kabbalistic imagery featured in this poem. As she notes, “The lines ‘I have come in time/

spoken by wheel’ refers to the **Sefer Yetsira**, a mystical text comprising two parts. The first part is concerned with the ten **sefirot**, the emanations of God, and the second part with the twenty-two letters. These letters are conceived of as fixed on a cosmic wheel that has 231 gates and rotates front to back. This rotating wheel teaches us the concept of the coincidence of opposites.” In a footnote, she further elaborates, “The poem’s title refers to the two lowermost of the ten **sefirot**, divine emanations, which are depicted in the shape of an anthropos. The flashing seal is the passage through which the king (the **sefira** just above the flashing seal, i.e. the phallus) unites with the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect, called the Seventh Palace. In the ensuing conjunction, the female aspect is raised as a consequence of being a container for the flashing seal (the phallus) and becomes the crown. That is to say, through the union she is masculinized. This is a kabbalistic view with which Wolfson takes exception, and with which he does not agree, as he reiterates repeatedly in his scholarly articles and books.” See Barbara E. Galli, **On Wings of Moonlight: Elliot R. Wolfson’s Poetry in the Path of Rosenzweig and Celan** (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), pp. 67, 183 fn. 60. In this study, Galli presents extended analyses of Wolfson’s poems in relation to the philosophical inheritance of Franz Rosenzweig and the poetic tradition of Paul Celan.

The Book of Wings: Skytree
Chapter Fifteen of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Skytree**, 2006. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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“Words are wings woven / by tongue & tooth.” And by the strokes of a brush or the lines of a pen. If words on a page and brushstrokes on canvas can be imagined as the individual filaments that make up the plumes of feathers, then books and paintings can be viewed metaphorically as creatures of flight. The ideas they contain can also be seen as mysterious presences that crawl through the narrow pathways of the mind, across the dark, fertile terrain of the creative imagination. In the depths of this

receptive ground, ideas take root and flourish, then slide and shimmer through lush branches, while overhead, birds perch lightly on outstretched arboreal limbs.

Imagine that you are walking among the trees that grow in the garden of flowering light. As you allow your mind and body to float, you feel as though your spirit has become interwoven in the patterns of the tree limbs that form an intertwined canopy overhead. Words come freely into your consciousness. As you continue to walk, the words turn into winged presences that flutter before your eyes, gently transforming into different colors, shapes, sizes, and patterns. You suddenly feel as though you have reached a place where philology and ornithology have become a single subject. While contemplating the vision of words on wings, you look down, and you see a bright white feather standing on your path, perched upright on a bed of ivy. You pick the feather up and carry it home, knowing full well that you can use this plume to write your own stories, as wings make words.

Wolfson's painting **Skytree** (2006) is an etheric image in which clouds appear to be woven from violet and white feathers spun into delicate, floating configurations set against an intensely blue sky. Passages of modulated white pigment reveal scattered hints of lavender and magenta, while subtle orange undertones are discernible within the tangled limbs of the painting's illuminated ground. Compositionally, this abstract image evokes the silhouette of a blossoming tree, a plumed presence standing where wisps of clouds have become rooted in the sky.

Wolfson has noted that this painting is related to the image of the **Shekhinah**, and that in kabbalistic symbolism the **Shekhinah** is sometimes described as a tree. Descending from the heavens, the **Shekhinah** is said to provide a source of celestial grounding for the earth, as this emanation of divine light occupies a foundational position at the base of the sefirotic schema (fig. 7). Yet as Wolfson also observes in **Alef, Mem, Tau**, it is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that carries the ambivalent feminine associations of the final **sefirot**: "In zoharic symbolism, **Malkhut** [another name for **Shekhinah**] is linked symbolically to the Tree of Knowledge, which is identified further as the Tree of Death."[\[footnote\]](#) Thus

exemplifying another expression of the **coincidentia oppositorum**, Wolfson observes that these intertwined images are related “to the mystical enlightenment that discerns that death is contained in life, that the demonic is in the divine,” and that in zoharic sources, death is figured as a “female, primordial serpent.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Wolfson, **Alef, Mem, Tau**, p. 259, n. 71.

Wolfson, **Alef, Mem, Tau**, pp. 173- 74.

This vertiginous interplay of the terrestrial and celestial domains, of life and death becoming clothed in shifting veils of trees, serpents, and flights of light, becomes expressed in poetic form in Wolfson’s “feathers of text”:

"golden" "feather" "stroke" "serpent" "spleen" "slithering" "down"
"faltering" "sight" "in night" "become" "night" "incalculably" "dark"
"tunnel" "light" "vision" "split" "tipping" "point" "memory" "tumble"

As in so many of Wolfson’s poems, the spare vertical structure of “feathers of text” resembles a ladder, with each word representing a descending step. Much like **Skytree**, “feathers of text” can be approached as a diaphanous tissue of transient consciousness, a vision presented through an aesthetic reversal of rooting down from the source while pulling up from the root. Variously composed of golden feathers and shimmering snakeskin, the body of the poem forms a hybrid, chimerical creature: that of the paradox. The term itself is composed of the prefix para, which indicates a sense of direction, specifically a location that is beside, alongside of, or beyond; while the root, dox, descends from **dokein**, which means to think or to seem.[\[footnote\]](#) A paradox thus presents an open invitation to think alongside of—or alternatively, the gift of thinking beyond—which in moments of ascending consciousness may lead viewers through a descent into open sky as they climb down the lines of a poem.

Regarding the concept of paradox in relation to mysticism, skepticism, and transcendence, see Matthew C. Bagger, **The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, and the Absurd** (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

As embodiments of paradoxical creativity, **Skytree** and “feathers of text” represent **coincidentia oppositora** that simultaneously encompass the tunnel and the journey, the darkness and the light, eros and thanatos, the

slithering snakeskin and the golden feathers. Conjoined by a single shaft of doubled meaning, the story of the fall can thus be read as a story of flight, a vision drawn in a single stroke yet projected onto a split screen. Taken together, **Skytree** and “feathers of text” present complementary paradoxical visions in which creatures of land and sky offer themselves as vehicles for the eye and mind to take flight. Words are wings.

Saying His Own Unsaying: Passion
Chapter Sixteen of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson





Elliot R. Wolfson, **Passion**, 2004. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Reverberating depths cut a dense path through Wolfson's symbolic self-portrait, **Passion** (2004). The twisting lines of this elusive, monochromatic canvas resemble the calligraphic structures of Zen brush painting, just as they present a twist on the theme of sacrifice in Christian martyrdom. This black and white painting is signed in red in the lower-right corner; as Wolfson says, the image is symbolically signed in blood. According to the artist, with the sole exception of a white patch at the center of the canvas, this work was painted in a single brushstroke, beginning at the center and radiating outward. The variety of texture displayed in this meandering line conveys the expressive multiplicity that lies embedded within a single ribbon of paint.

While highly abstract, the painting evokes a striding figure who appears in profile, wearing a dark suit and hat. The crown of the hat is the densest area of the composition, just as this tonal concentration of black represents the starting point of the painting. This area remains the most centered and concentrated spot in a compositional swirl of calculated instability. While the self-portrait appears as an unreadable tableau formed by illegible calligraphy, the image is also reminiscent of Marc Chagall's figure of the wandering scribe, which appears on the cover of Wolfson's book, **Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism**. Just as **Passion** can be seen as Wolfson's "signature pieces," the artist himself has affirmed, "I think that all my work, even the work intensely focused on Jewish mysticism, is a venturing beyond."[\[footnote\]](#)

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, August 22, 2006.

In this apophatic self-portrait, the striding figure is formed from the same brushstroke as the impenetrable morass of the environment he inhabits. This densely chaotic tangle of forms evokes the poignant concluding line of “flashing seal/seventh palace”: “i have come to walk / but, alas, there is no path.” That is, there is no path, precisely because **everything** is the path, hence nothing is. Formally and philosophically, the painting’s extensive “white space” thus evokes the blankness of the **via negativa**. This paradoxical state conveys not only central themes of Christian and Jewish mysticism, but the Zen notion of “the path that is no-path [that] encompasses manifold paths.”[\[footnote\]](#) Walking through this unwalkable canvas, it is impossible to know where the figure leaves off and the ground begins.[\[footnote\]](#) Just as the figure blends into the abstract visual field that he inhabits, the field merges with the figure, forming a **coincidentia oppositorum** that simultaneously asserts and obliterates the distinctions between subject and object, figure and ground, fusing the two into a state of unified disjunction and disjunctive unity. **Passion** thus appears as an abstract portrait of a path-breaker, a visionary who treads ancient ground and who, through his continuities and divergences with established interpretive patterns, breaks old paths in order to break new ones.

Wolfson, “New Jerusalem Glowing,” p. 112.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has written extensively on the subject of humans existing in a state of corporeal interwovenness with their environments. Merleau-Ponty has eloquently observed that the body and the space it occupies are not two distinct entities: “The analysis of bodily space has led us to results which may be generalized. We notice for the first time, with regard to our own body, what is true of all perceived things: that the perception of space and the perception of the thing, the spatiality of the thing and its being as a thing are not two distinct problems.” Thus “the experience of our own body teaches us to embed space in existence,” just as the movements of the body in space are “comparable to a work of art...[and appear as] a nexus of living meanings.” See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, **Phenomenology of Perception**, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 148, 151.

Translated another way, the striding figure in **Passion** can be imagined as forging a way forward by “tread[ing] narrow path betwixt fire and flesh, / whither angels fall and righteous transgress.” These lyrical images of falling

angels and hypernomian transgressions appear in the final lines of Wolfson's poem "enoch's stitch" (1982):[\[footnote\]](#)
"enoch's stitch" appears in **Pathwings**, p. 53.

"with our Feet we bless thee," "lady of our night," "our walk is prayer"
"offered in exile of despair," "hope survival, continuation return." "trace of
light lingering in dark," "as limbs have stretched" "to raise bone and spark"
"of ancient moabite," "whose seed lay gathered in field" "across river of
succulent hemp." "with our Feet—descended to death—we" "tread narrow
path betwixt fire and flesh," "whither angels fall and righteous transgress."

"enoch's stitch" can be read as another aesthetic meditation on the ways in which the bodies of angels become symbolically translated into human form. Enoch was a biblical prophet and scribe who is believed to have lived an exemplary human life and was "translated," or underwent a bodily assumption, into heaven, where he became transformed into the Archangel Metatron.[\[footnote\]](#) Notably, in kabbalistic texts the Archangel Haniel is credited with escorting Enoch to heaven. Haniel's name means the Grace of God or the Glory of God, and this angel is associated with mystical knowledge and with the energies of the moon, the silver-white light that is visible in the darkness of the nighttime sky. Notably, this monochromatic interplay forms the palette of "enoch's stitch" and **Passion**, atonal tonal imagery that begins to lead toward a conclusion, by way of moonlight. See Genesis 5: 24; Ecclesiasticus 49: 14; and Hebrews 11: 5.

The Prophet Enoch is known for being a cobbler, an occupation that is symbolically associated with mending souls and sewing worlds together. [\[footnote\]](#) Regarding these themes, Wolfson notes that the poem "enoch's stitch" is related to "the tradition about Enoch as a cobbler who mends the break between male and female through his stitching."[\[footnote\]](#) Repairing the union of gendered being, Enoch can also be seen as affecting a **conjunction oppositorum** that mends the breaks between the human and angelic realms. The Archangel Metatron is especially significant in this regard, as this figure represents a composite presence of human and angelic forms who is variously characterized as "the celestial scribe" and "the personification of time."[\[footnote\]](#) As Wolfson has remarked, "Metatron, the Agent Intellect, [is] the last of the ten separate intelligences according to

the widespread cosmological scheme adopted in the Middle Ages, and related kabbalistically to **Malkhut**, the last of the ten emanations, in her angelomorphic manifestation.”[\[footnote\]](#) Regarding the conjunction of the human and angelic domains, Wolfson has further noted that, “from the kabbalistic standpoint, there is no distinction, as the imagination of the visionary is the divine potency of **malkhut**—in the angelic body of metatron—and the divine potency is the prism through which the imagination sees.”[\[footnote\]](#)

As Peter Dawkins has noted, “Cabalists perceive Metatron as the universal form or soul of the supra-individual or universal man, called the Messiah, whose body is composed of ‘avir’ (aether) and whose spirit is ‘Shekhinah’ (the Presence of God immanent in the cosmos), the combination of which is light (i.e. soul).” See Peter Dawkins’s entry on “Enoch” for the Francis Bacon Research Trust at <http://www.fbrt.org.uk/pages/essays/essay-enoch.html>.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, August 23, 2006. In addition, Wolfson has noted that Abraham Abulafia provides a commentary on the theme of human/angelic composite presences in his description of wisdom in the Book of Proverbs (8: 30), as one “who is human (**ben adam**) from one side and an angel (**mal’akh**) from the other.” For an extended discussion of this imagery, see Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence.”

Wolfson, “**Imago templi**,” p. 121, n. 5.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, July 26, 2007.

Given the complex associations ascribed to **Malkhut**, the kabbalistic and poetic imagery of “Feet descended to death” is particularly significant. In **Language, Eros, Being**, Wolfson notes that the phrase comes from the Book of Proverbs (5: 5), where the image is associated with Mawet, an excoriating figure of feminine evil who personifies death and the female powers of the demonic, with “feet descended down to death.”[\[footnote\]](#) Interweaving these associations, Wolfson has observed, “The kabbalistic use of the image of Proverbs of her feet descending to death relates to the entrapment of the Shekhinah in the demonic, which does resonate with my own use of that image in ‘enoch’s stitch.’”[\[footnote\]](#) As such, the figures oscillate in a state of “luminal darkness” that incorporates points of divine origin and states of demonic imprisonment.

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 534, fn. 306; and **Alef, Mem, Tau**, pp. 172-74.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, August 23, 2006.

Finally, the poem's opening reference to the "lady of our night" at once evokes the kabbalist's intense meditational engagement with the Shekhinah as a means of reuniting imaginatively with the sacred aspect of divinity, and with his actual wife in the erotic encounter on the Sabbath.[\[footnote\]](#) This conjoined imagery is at once absorptive and reflective, bespeaking a desire for integration expressed from a place of exile. Regarding these interwoven themes, Wolfson has further noted that "the traditional kabbalistic trope of elevating the spark to restore the light to its divine source [is] an idea that became popular through Hasidic lore."[\[footnote\]](#) Thus to see the trace of light lingering in the darkness is at once to view human experience from the perspectives of erotic embrace and angelic exile—a venture that can also be seen as covering and recovering the reversible terrains of erotic exile and angelic embrace.

For a commentary on Wolfson's discussion of these ritual processes in **Speculum**, see Kripal, **Roads of Excess**.

Wolfson, "New Jerusalem Glowing," p. 108.

Toward an Ending, by Way of Snowfall: Self-Portrait in the Snow
Chapter Sixteen of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Self-Portrait in the Snow**, 2006. © Elliot
R. Wolfson.

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Imagine that you are standing in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. As you gaze upward, admiring the glorious frescoes by Michelangelo, little flecks of gold paint begin to flake off the ceiling. These floating pieces of gold look like gold leaf; very thin yet slightly sturdier than paint chips, they descend in a mixed blend that forms a beautiful meld. The illuminated golden flecks land sweetly and lightly, resting on your head and shoulders. Drifting downward like gentle, slow-moving snow, they fall in quarter-inch and half-inch pieces. As you stand amidst the falling flakes, you realize that this flurry is a visible manifestation of light that typically remains unseen. You then feel the quiet melding within yourself as you stand amidst a shower of ancient light that is embodied anew.

Like gentle snowfall, Wolfson's **Self-Portrait in the Snow** (2006) is a diaphanous image that remains suspended between visibility and invisibility, iconography and abstraction. The shifting field of the painted palimpsest seems at once to reveal and conceal traces of presence through the thinnest veil of forms. Warm wisps of rising white light appear against a pale, sky-blue background, while an array of flickering brushstrokes loosely collect and disperse into the spectral outlines of a face whose features are clouded in a gossamer veil. Regarding this artwork, Wolfson has explained that “**Self-Portrait in the Snow** just appeared. I did not intend to paint any face or image and it came forth on its own. It is a mystery to me.” [[footnote](#)] The painting’s enigmatic presence seems to emanate from the simultaneous crystallization and dissolution of its internal forms, so that form and formlessness emerge as the single face of the image.

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, October 1, 2006.

Like a negation that is also an affirmation, **Self-Portrait in the Snow** can be seen as an apophasic self-portrait, an abstract image whose features are “embodied naked” just as they remain “fully attired” within the half-buried surface of the painting. Instantiating another aesthetic translation of the **coincidentia oppositorum**, Wolfson appears to perform a saying of his own unsaying. Marking presence by showcasing the corresponding face of its absence, the painting vividly exemplifies the ways in which the

diaphanous and the epiphanic again converge in Wolfson's oeuvre. **Self-Portrait in the Snow** can be seen as an elusive garment in which the artist's unseen likeness "is manifest in the hiddenness of its disclosure."[\[footnote\]](#) Or, as Jacques Derrida observed of the genre of self-portraiture in general in **Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins**, this image can be seen as an abstract embodiment of "the **transcendental retrait** [retreat or contraction] or **withdrawal** [that] at once calls for and forbids the self-portrait" (emphasis in original).[\[footnote\]](#) Wolfson, "New Jerusalem Glowing," p. 122.

Jacques Derrida, **Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins**, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (1990; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 57.

Like an image glimpsed through a "cloud of unknowing," [\[footnote\]](#) or a screen that creates presence from a tissue of absence, **Self-Portrait in the Snow** resonates with another kabbalistic concept, that of **efes**. This mystical term connotes a sense of infinite nothingness. As Wolfson has observed in **Language, Eros, Being**, **efes** "technically demarcates the space suspended betwixt matter and form." This space between space thus encompasses the nothing that is everything, "the **coincidentia oppositorum**, the fullness of being beyond the polarity of being and nonbeing."[\[footnote\]](#) In turn, Wolfson's abstract self-portrait can be viewed symbolically as a visual translation of the concept of **efes**, as an image that forms and dissolves in the space between space, and thus represents a portrait of the no-thing-ness of the forms between forms.

For a discussion of thematically related imagery, see Wolfson's essay "New Jerusalem Glowing," in which he comments on "the thirteenth-century anonymous Christian mystical work, **The Cloud of Unknowing**, a locution that denotes that one cannot know God except through unknowing, the **via negativa**, as it is known to philosophers and historians of religion. We are not told who it is that comes forth from the cloud, but we can surmise that it is the soul" (p. 142).

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. 97.

Contemplating the concept of **efes** while gazing intensely at **Self-Portrait in the Snow**, the viewer goes "deeper still":[\[footnote\]](#) "deeper still" is published in **Pathwings**, p. 99.

"deeper" "still" "the silence" "i speak" "breaking" "silence" "ripped" "from wound" "like eye" "from gaze" "bandaged" "syntax" "exhuming" "the silence" "still" "deeper" "than" "i speak"

As in **Self-Portrait in the Snow**, in “deeper still” Wolfson speaks in a language of silence as he again performs the disappearance of his own appearance. The veil of form that is just barely visible in the painting becomes the bandaged wound of the poem from which one tears one’s gaze as the image “radiates the epiphany of not-showing.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Wolfson, **Language, Eros, Being**, p. xiv. Note the resonance of these concepts with the Sanskrit word, **akash**, which signifies a vision of space as “the thing that is radiant.”

When asked to comment on his creative processes, Wolfson sent what can only be described as an apophatic reply. His enigmatic prose[\[footnote\]](#) conveys a characteristic lightness of touch:

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, June 21, 2006.

“i do not know how the paintings emerge.” “what i know is that i have a feeling,” “and the feeling speaks to me in color formations” “and then i try to follow that feeling.” “they are done quickly...” “the same is true of the poems.” “one breath”

Affirming an openness to what lies beyond vision, the painting and poem reveal the affirmation of sight as immersion in a snow-blind.

Breaking Views of Falling Light: Vitreous Detachment and Free Fall
Chapter Eighteen of Marcia Brennan's Flowering Light: Kabbalistic
Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Vitreous Detachment**, 2008. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

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Vividly incorporating the far ends of the tonal spectrum, Wolfson's paintings and poems display a broad range of expressions that extend from vibrant prismatic colors to nuanced monochromatic fields. The varied language of the palette also serves as an apt metaphor for the creative process itself. As Wolfson has said of his painting, "each venture at the canvas is a leap of faith, a plunge into darkness to see some light."[\[footnote\]](#)

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, May 28, 2007.

The paradox of plunging into darkness to see some light has a strong thematic resonance with Wolfson's abstract painting **Vitreous Detachment** (2008). At the outset, this enigmatic phrase requires some explanation. Vitreous detachment is a non-sight-threatening optical condition in which flashes of light and floating forms appear in a person's line of vision. According to the medical literature produced by the National Eye Institute of the National Institutes of Health, "Most of the eye's interior is filled with vitreous, a gel-like substance that helps the eye maintain a round shape. There are millions of fine fibers intertwined within the vitreous that are attached to the surface of the retina, the eye's light-sensitive tissue. As we age, the vitreous slowly shrinks, and these fine fibers pull on the retinal surface. Usually the fibers break, allowing the vitreous to separate and shrink from the retina. This is a vitreous detachment." Common side-effects associated with this condition include the appearance of small shadows on the retina that are experienced as "floaters, or little 'cobwebs' or specks that seem to float about" in the field of vision, as well as "flashes of light (lightning streaks)" that appear in the peripheral vision.[\[footnote\]](#)

The entry on vitreous detachment at the National Eye Institute website can be accessed at <http://www.nei.nih.gov/health/vitreous/index.asp#top>.

Vitreous detachment thus refers to a condition of optical detachment, an internal state in which broken webs of fine fibers alter the visual field, while the external world is perceived through an unfamiliar array of lights

and shadows. Thus, literally and symbolically, vitreous detachment represents a condition of visual abstraction, a sense of opticity that is associated with the act of drawing away or pulling away. The language in play is significant. The word “abstraction” derives from the Latin **abstraher**, which is composed of the root **trahere** and means “to draw,” and the prefix **ab**, which designates the direction of away. Abstraction thus refers to the act or process of drawing away, while the multiple definitions of the term encompass both visionary ideas and decorative surfaces.

[[footnote](#)] Conjoining these multiple associations, **Vitreous Detachment** interweaves numerous layers of abstraction, as the painting symbolizes a corporeal and aesthetic state of drawing away through the convergent terrain of vision and the visionary.

See the entries on “abstract” and “abstraction” in **Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary**, p. 4.

Vitreous Detachment displays an animated composition that suggestively evokes what it might be like to look through a semi-detached gaze at a dissolving screen or an unfamiliar field of simultaneously disintegrating and emergent forms. Once again, the ambiguity of Wolfson’s visual abstractions enables the imagery to oscillate between epiphanic disclosure and diaphanous concealment. Through carefully graded shades of black and white, **Vitreous Detachment** again expresses the paradoxical tonality of an atonal painting. In this work, Wolfson presents a cloudy field of columnar proto-presences whose indistinct forms alternately seem to materialize and dematerialize through the fractured vision of the canvas. Some of the forms loosely resemble the ithyphallic hieroglyphs found in ancient cave paintings, particularly the shamanic figure of eros and death, the hybrid falling man with a bird’s head and erect penis that the philosopher and novelist Georges Bataille perceived in the caves of Lascaux. [[footnote](#)] Resembling the attendant figures displayed on partially excavated archeological remnants depicting a forgotten ritual, these forms appear as herms loosely clustering in a mysterious visual procession. One such darkened, upright form emerges emphatically at the center of the painting. A graphic expression of the **coincidentia oppositorum**, this abstract vertical figure is simultaneously readable as a mark of assertion and erasure that displays a sense of internal solidity and diaphanous fragility. Embodying a presence that is an absence, this dark slash symbolically

evokes a tear in the field of vision, a cut or caesura that functions at once as a trench and a doorway—in short, an abstraction that is produced through an act of drawing away.

Regarding the mythic associations of prehistoric cave paintings with themes of eros and death, see Georges Bataille, **The Tears of Eros**, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), pp. 34 ff.

The reciprocal dynamics of ambivalent vision are also expressed in one of Wolfson's untitled poems:

"be thou" "darkness" "this night" "so bright" "we see" "the dark" "in light"
"of night" "too bright" "to see" "the light" "in dark"

The spare lines of this eloquently schematic structure again lead readers through a path of reversibility and interchange, just as the poem's glimmering imagery evokes a light that is too bright to be seen except through the shifting fabric (**arigah**) of night, and thus a luminousness that glitters through the veil (**vilon**) of darkness. The texture of the poem thus suggestively reflects Wolfson's comment that “each venture at the canvas is a leap of faith, a plunge into darkness to see some light.”[\[footnote\]](#)

Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, May 28, 2007.



Elliot R. Wolfson, **Free Fall**, 2008. © Elliot R. Wolfson.

This paradoxical exchange of darkness and light also provides an apt description of Wolfson's painting **Free Fall** (2008). Like **Vitreous Detachment**, **Free Fall** appears to be a painted meditation on what happens when vision takes flight. Indeed, it is difficult to determine just how ethereal the ether of this nebulous canvas is. Yet this indeterminacy is appropriate, as the nebula itself represents another meaningfully ambiguous concept. A nebula at once signifies the altered vision associated with "a slight cloudy opacity of the cornea," and the sweep of the heavens through "immense bodies of highly rarefied gas or dust in [the] interstellar space" of distant galaxies.[\[footnote\]](#) As if conjoining these associations on the misty surface of the painting, viewers symbolically encounter a vision of the universe as light reflected in the free fall of the gaze.

Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 564.

Amidst a shifting ground of foggy, cloud-like forms, there appears the abstract silhouette of a golden "falling" angel with curving, outstretched wings. Yet the painting's intricate visual dynamics remain characteristically reciprocal and ambiguous, as the fall is readable as a leap, and descent as flight. Folding back on itself, **Free Fall** thus offers an emblematic portrait of Wolfson's artwork in general, a doubled vision of how light breaks the fall, and how the fall breaks the light.